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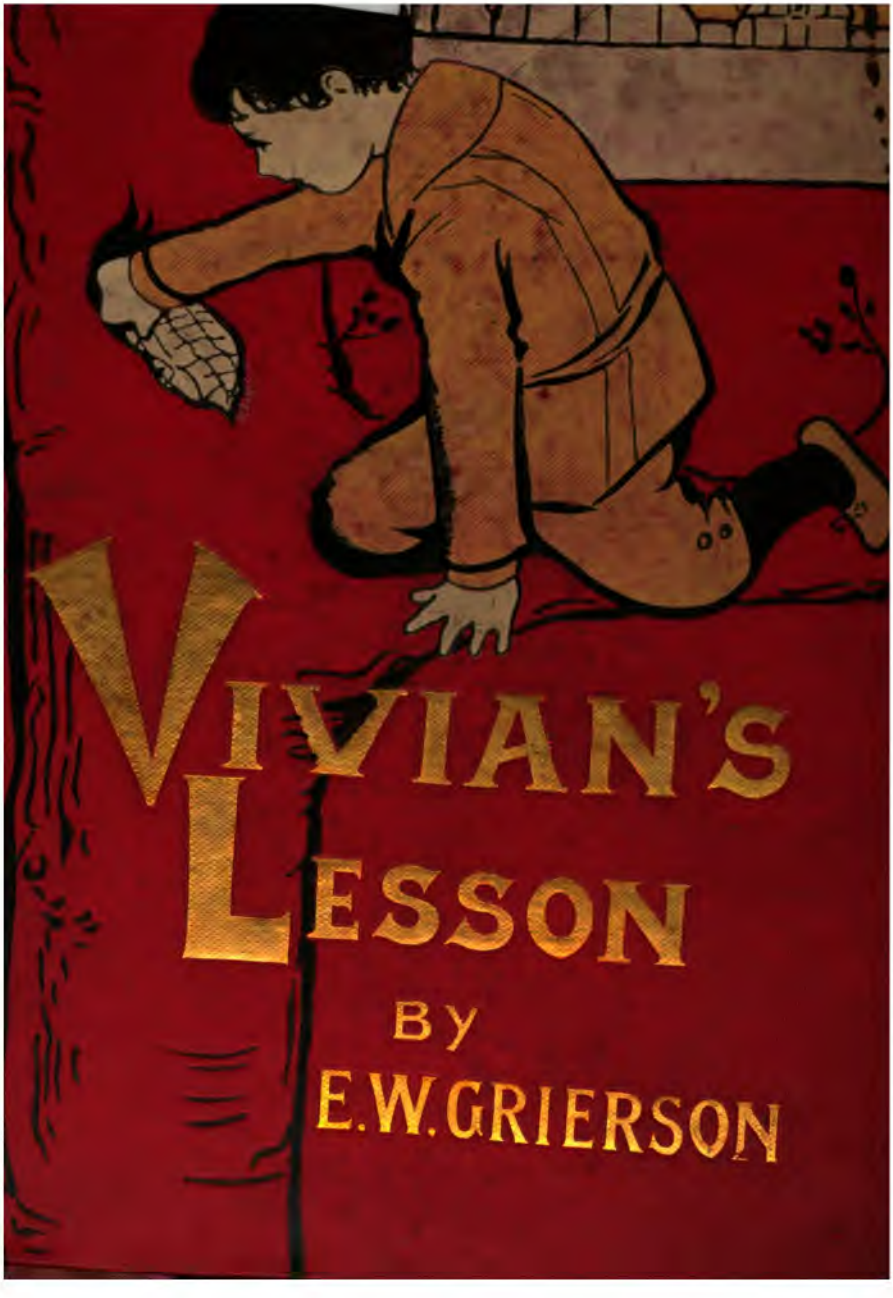
VIVIAN'S
LESSON
By
E.W.GRIERSON

Juvenile literature - Fiction ( )

VIVIAN'S LESSON

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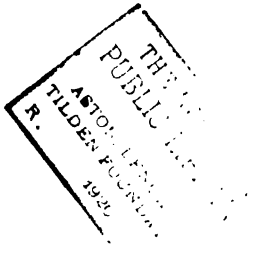

Easter 19/08.

They made such a pretty picture that there was quite a burst of applause.

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4/11/21
P.M.

VIVIAN'S LESSON

By

ELIZABETH W. GRIERSON

Author of
'Children's Tales from Scottish Ballads'
'The Children's Book of Edinburgh,' &c.

WITH TEN ILLUSTRATIONS
by
Hilda Cowham

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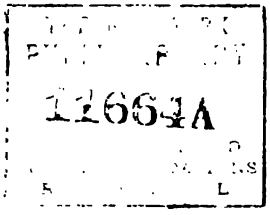

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VIVIAN'S LESSON.

CHAPTER I.

WHAT BEGAN IT.

'COME on, Vivian. It is high time we were going home; you know we promised mother that we would come off the ice at half-past four.'

'Well, so we will; but it is only five-and-twenty past now, so we have plenty of time for one turn more. Come on, old stupid; you are always frightened of being late;' and the younger of the speakers, a brown-eyed, mischievous-looking lad of about eleven, swung off with his three companions, leaving his brother standing watching them, a troubled look on his face.

He hated to make a fuss, and he did not want to leave the ice a moment sooner than he could help; but a promise is a promise, and

he had given his word that they would be ready to leave the pond at the half-hour. It was later than they were generally allowed to stay; but it was Saturday afternoon, and there were signs of a thaw, so, as the ice might not last till Monday, their father had agreed to an extra half-hour on condition that they left the ice punctually and hurried home.

Vivian had given his word readily enough, and had meant to keep it; but now, as he flew round and round the pond, crying 'Just one turn more,' he seemed to have forgotten all about his promise.

Ronald sat down and took off his skates, then stepped on the path, and stood buckling them together.

'Come on, Vivi,' he entreated. 'It is the half-hour now, and you know how anxious mother will be.'

'All right,' said Vivian a little sulkily, 'I suppose I must; but it is an awful nuisance, when we may not have such lovely ice all winter again.'

'I should think so,' struck in Fergus Strangeways. 'I am thankful that father doesn't make us come in so soon. Why, the moon

will be up in no time, and we will stay on quite late. Captain Laing and he are coming down before dinner, and Captain Laing promised to show us how to cut the "Figure Eight."'

'How jolly!' said Ronald a little wistfully, while Vivian bent his head over his straps and pretended not to hear.

'Couldn't you stay, really?' asked Charlie Strangeways, Fergus's elder brother; 'you could come in and have tea with us. I dare say Dr Armitage would know where you were; it is going to be lovely moonlight, and it isn't as if we were to be alone all the time. I don't suppose that he would have minded if he had known that the dad and Captain Laing were coming.'

'Oh, do let us stay, Ronald! I'm sure father wouldn't mind. You know he did say that he would have taken us out by moonlight himself if he had not been so busy,' pleaded Vivian.

'No, Charlie,' said Ronald firmly. 'It is very good of you to ask us, and it would have been splendid fun; but father didn't know about your father and Captain Laing, and he would wonder where we were. Besides, we promised.—So hurry up, Vivian.'

'What a stick you are, Ronald!' said Fergus; 'you can't change a bit, even when circumstances change. Just because Dr Armitage said that you couldn't be out alone here after dark, you spoil all the fun by going off, although it is very different now that father and Captain Laing are coming.'

'Don't be stupid, Fergus,' put in Charlie good-naturedly. 'If they promised, they must go. Besides, it is a long way over to Holmend; it is easy for us with our house close by.'

Charlie was fifteen, and a public school boy, so his word carried weight with it, and his brother was silent, while Vivian took up his skates more cheerfully.

'We'll see you in the beginning of the week,' went on Charlie; 'we are going to practise shooting on Tuesday if the frost doesn't hold, we have got such jolly little pistols from Uncle Don; they carry quite a long way, and one can kill a bird with them. You must come over and bring yours; the Doctor is going to give you a pair for Christmas, isn't he?'

Poor Vivian turned hot all over. If there was one thing in the world he was frightened

of, it was being laughed at. As a rule, the boys were at liberty to choose their Christmas presents; and when, a fortnight before, Fergus had told him of his uncle's intended present, he had instantly agreed to ask his father for the same, and great had been his disappointment and dismay when his request met with a grave refusal.

'A pistol for your Christmas present! Not if I know it, my boy. What! Fergus and Vere and Charlie going to have them? Well, if I mistake not, they will be in my hands shortly. No, no; if their father likes to risk their lives, that is no reason why I should risk yours. Now, don't look so glum; I know what I am talking about. If you had seen the case I saw over at Whitforth the other day: a lad older than either Ronald or you had got hold of one of these pistols, and it went off in his little brother's face. I don't want to harrow your feelings, but,' and the Doctor's voice dropped, and he spoke sadly, 'that poor little chap will never be able to see again. No; I'll give you anything you like, in reason, for your Christmas present, but a pistol is out of the question.'

At the time the explanation had been sufficient, but now Vivian's eager little spirit felt very rebellious.

Fergus Strangeways was just a year older than he was, and surely he was as capable of being careful as Fergus. How Fergus and Vere would laugh at him if they knew the whole story! He flashed a warning look at Ronald, but Ronald did not seem to understand.

'We may come out to watch,' he said in his quiet voice; 'but father won't let us have pistols yet. He says we are too young. He has promised to give us proper guns when we are sixteen. He will not let us shoot before that.'

The pitying looks on his companions' faces were quite lost on Ronald, who was only thinking of his promise to be home in good time; but they stung Vivian even more than the words that followed.

'What a nuisance it must be to be so well looked after! You'll grow into regular muffs if you don't look out.'

'I would give you a licking for that, just to judge if the symptoms are beginning, but I haven't time to-night,' said Ronald, with a laugh,

conscious that none of the boys could stand up against him; and he walked off whistling through the woods, followed by Vivian, who was fuming with rage and injured pride.

'What made you go and give me away like that?' he asked presently. 'You know there is a talk of our going to Aunt Dora's next week. I know, anyhow, because mother had a letter, and if only you had held your tongue I would have said that very likely we would be away from home, and they need never have known anything about father not letting us have these pistols. Now Fergus will go all over the place laughing at us for a couple of babies;' and he kicked at the fallen leaves viciously in his vexation.

'As if I minded what Fergus Strangeways says!' retorted Ronald scornfully; 'why, he's the veriest little ass going. He may get a pistol, but I bet you a sixpence that he daren't let it off, in spite of all his bluster. Besides, I knew nothing about any invitation to Aunt Dora's; and if I had, I wouldn't have been such a sneak as to pretend that that was the reason that we couldn't go to shoot with them. Of course it is a nuisance. I would have liked a

pistol as well as you; but father would not have hindered us having one if he had not had good reasons, and now that he has promised us that lovely camera I'm sure we can't grumble.'

'That's all very well for you,' growled Vivian; 'you always were a bit of a muff, with your music, and your photographs, and your collections. "The paragon" the other boys call you behind your back, for they say that you haven't enough spirit in you to do anything wrong.'

'They had better say it to my face then, and I'll give them what for, and you too for listening to such rot,' said Ronald hotly; and then he laughed at his own vehemence. 'Don't let us quarrel on Christmas Eve,' he went on pleasantly; 'I'll race you across the meadow.'

They set off at a run, and by the time they had reached the garden gate, hot and breathless, they had almost forgotten the cause of their anger.

'There is mother at the window, and Dorothy,' cried Vivian, waving his cap. 'Doesn't a lit-up room look jolly and comfortable when one is outside? After all, I am rather glad that we

didn't stay any longer at the lake, for I am awfully hungry, and I expect there is a scrumptious tea in the schoolroom.'

As they went into the hall of the long, low red house, a little figure in white ran out to meet them.

'Hurry, quick!' she lisped, 'we's going to have tea wif muvver, an' then we's going to dec'rate. Black has brought in such a lot of green stuff, heaps an' heaps, all p'ickles. Dorothy knows, 'cause she hurted her fingers.'

'Dorothy was well warned, so it was her own fault,' said a clear voice behind her, and Mrs Armitage appeared in the hall. Tall, slim, and graceful, with a wealth of rippling hair and a sweet pale face, it was no wonder that to the boys mother was the centre of their world.

'Quickly, boys, run upstairs, get off those dirty boots, and get ready for tea. Father has been called out, and may not be home till quite late, so I will have it with you in the schoolroom, and afterwards we will try to get the hall decorated before he comes back. You know how he loves to see the greenery.'

After tea, Ellen the housemaid was pressed

into the service, so the decorations went on merrily; and as Vivian stood on a ladder fastening up the wreaths of bright holly which his mother's quick fingers wove so rapidly, while little Dorothy ran about, proud in the belief that she was helping every one, he thought quite pityingly of the Strangeways, who had no mother or little sister, although they might possess pistols and skate in the moonlight while he had to come home.

CHAPTER II.

AN INVITATION.

CHRISTMAS Day dawned clear and bright. All prospects of a thaw seemed to be gone, for the frost had been very keen during the night, and every little twig on the trees glittered in the sunshine as if it were set with diamonds.

'What a day for skating!' said Ronald at breakfast-time, after good-mornings and good wishes had been passed round. 'It almost makes one wish that Christmas had not fallen on a Sunday this year.'

'Oh Ronnie!' said little Dorothy aghast. 'You touldn't go skating to-day. Tink of the pudding, and we's going to have 'sert. I saw muvver putting it out—oranges, an' nuts, an' 'nannas.'

'Yes; but, Pussy, Christmas dinner is like the frost, it doesn't last for ever,' said Ronald, lifting his little sister into her place between his mother's chair and his own, while every-one laughed at her remark.

'Never mind,' said Mrs Armitage, 'even if

it had been a week-day—what with church, and dinner, and presents—there would not have been much time for skating; besides,' glancing out of the window as she spoke, 'I do not think that it will last like this all day. I fancy we will have a fresh fall of snow ere night. Here comes father, so you may begin, boys.'

Dr Armitage was a pleasant-looking man, of about middle age, with a kind, open face, and keen gray eyes. The likeness between him and his eldest son would have told a stranger at once what relationship there was between them.

'Well, boys,' he said cheerfully, turning over a pile of letters as he spoke, 'has mother told you the news yet?'

'What news?' they asked eagerly, while their mother shook her head in mock displeasure.

'Oh Jack, you cannot keep a secret!' she said, laughing. 'I did not mean to tell them till after church. It will keep running in their heads all through the service. However, there is no help for it now.—How would you like to go to London, boys? To Aunt Dora's, for a whole week by yourselves?'

'To Aunt Dora's, mother? Has she asked us? Oh yes, I remember, Vivian said'—— Ronald broke off abruptly.

Vivian's remark of the previous afternoon about an invitation to Aunt Dora's had flashed into his mind, and he was just going to ask him how he had heard the news when a frightened, warning look on his brother's face checked him.

'Oh, how jolly!' he went on, in some embarrassment, after a moment's hesitation; 'we have never been away ourselves before. Will you let us go, mother?'

His mother did not seem to notice his confusion, nor the puzzled look which he wore as he relapsed into silence, and sat watching his brother, who was talking rapidly, his eager little face flushed and his eyes sparkling.

'Yes, I think so,' she replied, 'if you promise to be very good boys. You are old enough now to be trusted away from home alone, so father and Dorothy and I must make up our minds to a quiet house for a week, for I wrote to Aunt Dora yesterday to say that you will be at Victoria at four o'clock on Monday afternoon.'

Breakfast was finished amidst much excited discussion as to what should be taken in the way of garments and portmanteau. A listener would have thought that the boys were going to America at least; but to lads of eleven and thirteen a first visit to London alone is a treat indeed.

As they were running upstairs to get ready for church, Mrs Armitage laid her hand on Vivian's shoulder and drew him into her room.

'What did Ronald mean at breakfast by saying that you had told him about Aunt Dora's invitation, Vivian?' she asked. 'How did either of you come to hear of it?'

The little boy rubbed the point of his toe uneasily on the carpet.

'Ronald is always thinking that I say things,' he answered evasively, 'and getting a fellow into a scrape. If he would only mind his own business.'

'Nay, Vivian, that is unjust; you know Ronald would be the last person in the world to get you into a scrape; and in this case there is no scrape to get into, unless you choose to make one. If by any chance you

found out anything about the invitation, as it seems you must have done, it probably was a mistake.'

'Yes, mother, that was just it, it was a mistake,' said Vivian, interrupting her eagerly. 'There was a letter of Aunt Dora's lying on your desk, and I saw a bit of it when you sent me to get those receipts.'

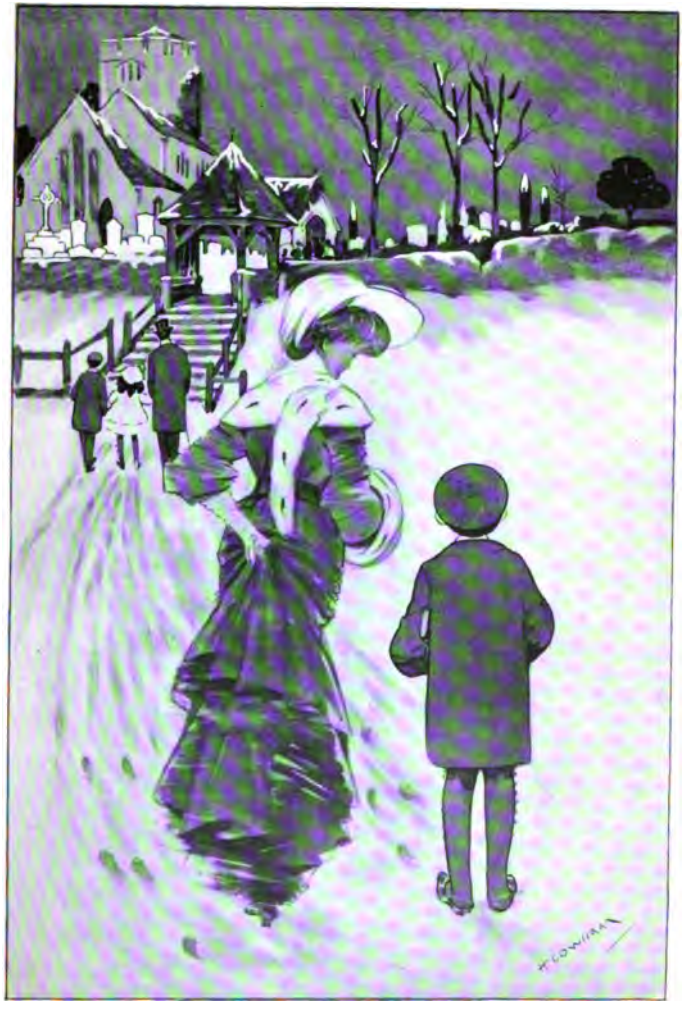
'But you must have taken time to read it, did you not?' said his mother gravely; 'that could not be a mistake. I thought perhaps you had heard father talking to me about it; we sometimes hear things that are not intended for us to hear, but then the honourable thing to do is to say frankly that you did hear it. To read a letter that is not intended for you is quite a different matter. I did not think a son of mine would have done that.'

The tears came into Vivian's eyes. He loved his mother passionately, and any appeal from her touched his proud little heart.

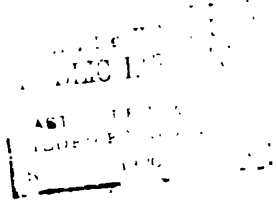
'It really was a mistake at first, mother. When I was looking about for those receipts, I saw the letter lying spread out, and I could not help seeing one sentence. "I hope you will let the boys," it began, and I did so

much want to know what it was that Aunt Dora wanted you to let us do, so I took up the piece of paper and looked over on the other side. I was sorry in a moment, but I did not like to tell.'

'No, that is just it,' said his mother. 'You did not like to tell, and so you were tempted at breakfast this morning to talk as if you knew nothing about it. That was not exactly telling a lie, Vivian; but do you not think that it was acting one? I think that is your besetting sin, my boy. You know that we all have a sin that we must specially fight against, and I want you to try and fight against yours. You have not the moral courage to confess when you have done something wrong, but you try to shuffle and explain things away, so as to hide what you have done. You have plenty of courage in other ways, quite as much, if not more, than Ronald. You have the kind of courage that would make you fight, or face danger; but there is a higher kind of courage than that, and I want you to try and gain it. I mean the courage that will tell the truth, even when the truth is not pleasant, and when you may get laughed at for telling



They were a merry party as they walked across the snowy meadow to church.



it, and which will own up to a fault rather than try to hide it.

'You are so quick and impulsive, you often do things without thinking, not because you do not mean to do what is right, but because you do not take time to see that it is wrong; and that leads to the worse sin of covering up the matter and telling half-lies to shield yourself. Now, as this is Christmas Day, we won't say anything more about it; only, dearie, try and remember who came this day to help us—to save us from our sins. That is what His name means.'

'Yes, mother,' said Vivian, beginning to fidget with all a healthy boy's dislike to a 'sermon,' and his mother let him go with a sigh.

'Will I ever be able to train him to be a brave and honourable man,' she thought to herself, 'with his quick, ambitious nature, his love of being first, coupled with his moral cowardice and fear of being laughed at?'

They were a merry party as they walked across the snowy meadow to church. Little Dorothy, who looked like a white woolly ball in her fur coat and cap, clinging to her father with one hand and to Ronald with the other,

as they gave her slides along the slippery footpath, while Vivian hovered round, now sliding himself, now threatening to snowball the others, all trace of the late conversation seeming to have vanished from his mind. But the good thoughts came back again in the old church, where there was an atmosphere of sober gladness, its gray stone pillars being wreathed with glistening holly, and brightly coloured banners hanging over the pulpit and choir-stalls.

The rector took for his text the very verse that his mother had spoken about; and as the old man talked simply to the congregation of the battle that each one of us has to wage against the sin in ourselves before we can hope to fight successfully against the sin that is in the world, and how the Bethlehem Babe came to help and save us, Vivian, sitting in his dark corner of the old-fashioned pew, gave his mother's hand a little squeeze, and, crushing his face against her cloak, made more good resolutions for the future than ever he had done before in the whole course of his happy, careless, light-hearted life.

CHAPTER III.

GOING TO LONDON.

WHO does not know the excitement of a first visit away from home, unaccompanied by any grown-up person?

The following morning the boys were downstairs twenty minutes before any one else, and it seemed as if Ellen would never bring in the coffee; while so many important messages came to take up their father's attention, it appeared as if it must be at least ten o'clock before breakfast and prayers were over, and they were at liberty at last to run upstairs to the schoolroom, where nurse was busy folding their clothes into their father's portmanteau, which had been called into service for the occasion.

And yet—when that was done, and the straps all fastened up, and Ronald had run down to the surgery to get a clean white label, and had printed 'Armitage, Victoria, London,' on it in his best printing, and Vivian had tied it on, while little Dorothy watched the proceed-

ings in silent admiration—there remained nearly four hours before the time came for an early lunch and the drive to the station.

The hours passed somehow, however, and at last the carriage was brought round, and the portmanteau was tucked away beside Black on the box, while father packed the boys inside, with mother and Dorothy, who were going to see them off. Just at the last moment he slipped two little paper packets into their hands, telling them not to open them until they were in the train. Then he shut the carriage door and nodded to Black, and they had actually started at last.

They felt quite important at the quiet little station, when mother went to get the tickets, and old Timms the porter came up, and, touching his cap, asked 'Where for, sir?' and Ronald answered, 'London, Victoria,' in a careless tone as if going to London were quite an everyday event. Old Timms noticed the tone, and his eyes twinkled, but he only touched his cap again, and said, 'Very good, sir,' and put the portmanteau beside the other luggage which was waiting ready for the London train.

Perhaps their hearts failed them a little,

although they both would have scorned the suggestion, as the train came roaring round the curve, and mother gave them a last kiss, saying, 'Give my love to Aunt Dora, and all the others, and enjoy yourselves, and be my own good boys; and, Vivian, remember our talk yesterday.' Then the guard hustled them into a carriage, the door banged, and the train moved on.

Now they had time to think about the little packets which their father had given them, and on opening them each was found to contain two half-crowns. This discovery quite raised their spirits again, for what may not be bought for five shillings in the wonderful shops in London!

It was a foggy afternoon, and Victoria Station looked very big, and dark, and bustling, as the train steamed into it; and as a porter threw open the door of their carriage, and they stepped on to the platform, the boys felt somewhat bewildered with the crowd of people who were running about in all directions.

'Supposing Aunt Dora has mistaken the train? I don't see her anywhere,' said Ronald, who was always rather anxious-minded.

'Oh, we'll just take a cab,' said Vivian confidently; 'that's the way people do, and give the man the address—"Eversley, Hampstead Heath." He will take us there all right. Hadn't we better go and look after our portmanteau? The porters are taking all the luggage out of that van. Some one may steal ours.'

'No; no one would dare do that; but, all the same, we had better see to it.—Here, porter!'

But the words were too gentle for the hurrying man to heed, or perhaps he had more important people in his eye, for he took no notice, and the boys were standing, feeling rather helpless, with a homesick longing for old Timms's honest red face, when Aunt Dora's cheery voice sounded just behind them.

'Well, boys, how are you? Did you think that I had forgotten you? Not a very cheerful welcome, was it—eh, Vivian—to let you arrive all by yourselves? But you must blame the fog and not me. It was quite clear when I started, and it is so foggy in some parts now that we had to drive very slowly. I am afraid it will take us quite a long time to get home; but never mind, you will enjoy your tea all the more when you get it.'

If it took a long time to get home, the boys hardly noticed it. It was impossible to be shy with Aunt Dora. She was so bright and full of fun, and so eager to hear all the home news—how mother and little Dorothy were, and how father's patients were getting on. She was Dr Armitage's sister, and had lived with him when he first settled at Sittingham, and she took as great an interest now in the old women at the almshouses and the new babies in the village as she had done in the old days when she had carried soup to one and milk to the other.

'Here we are at last!' she exclaimed, interrupting a graphic description which Vivian was giving of the latest village concert; and as she spoke the carriage turned in at an ivy-covered lodge, and drew up in front of a large square house which looked as if it were capable of holding a very large party indeed.

The instant the carriage stopped, the front door opened, and two eager faces appeared, peeping out behind the trim parlour-maid, who came down the steps to open the door and take the wraps.

'Isobel and Claude have been on the lookout,

you see,' laughed their mother. 'Their excitement has known no bounds ever since they knew that you were coming. But I don't see Ralph; I expect he will be deep in a book as usual. Run in out of the cold, boys, and Ann will bring your portmanteau.'

'We thought that you were never coming,' said Isobel, taking possession of her cousins at once, and leading the way upstairs to the schoolroom. 'Claude and I have been watching for the carriage ever since five o'clock, and it is a quarter to six now. Aren't you just famishing for your tea? It is all ready in the schoolroom, and I've to pour it out.'

'What will Miss Ritchie say to that?' asked Ronald, laughing. 'You remember you told us last Easter how particular she was about spots on the tablecloth, and a teapot is rather a heavy thing.'

'She's gone,' said Claude, who was contentedly bringing up the rear, with a broad grin on his rosy face, 'right away to Wales to spend her holidays. Mother said if we were very good we might do without a governess this Christmas, for I'm eight now you see, and that is quite big.'

'Who is quite big?' said a mocking voice as they entered the schoolroom, where a blazing fire and a table covered with delicious home-baked cakes were awaiting them, and a tall, thin boy, with a somewhat peevish expression, rose from a corner where he had been poring over a book, and came forward to shake hands. This was Ralph, the eldest of Mrs Osbourne's children. He was just a little older than Vivian, though he might have been Ronald's age from his very grown-up manner. As a little boy he had been very delicate, and had been abroad a great deal with an old French governess who had taught his mother when she was a child. He was at a boarding-school at Eastbourne now; and, having the idea in his own mind that he had seen a great deal of the world, he was rather inclined to patronise his cousins, who had always lived in the country, and to whom even a visit to London was an event.

They, on their part, did not like him nearly so much as they did Isobel and Claude, and could have told many a story of the want of pluck which he showed in outdoor games; but they admired him for the way in which he

could 'jabber French,' as Vivian termed it, and for the grown-up books which he read, and politeness made them careful not to stir up questions which might lead to quarrels.

Isobel they adored. She was such a jolly little tomboy, who could climb trees and play cricket as well as any boy, and yet she was such a dainty little maiden, with a very tender conscience and a peace-loving disposition, who often smoothed down angry words which might otherwise have led to blows. 'My little peace-maker,' her mother called her, and Ronald thought to himself, as they sat at tea, that the name was well chosen, as he saw the quick colour flash into Claude's rosy, determined little face at some scoffing remark of Ralph's, and noticed how cleverly Isobel changed the subject by talking about the party which they were to have the next night, and to which they were looking forward with eager anticipation.

'There is to be a Christmas tree,' she explained, pausing in her eagerness, with the teapot in her hand, in the middle of pouring out tea. 'Last year we had a cinematograph, and the year before a conjurer; but this year mother has promised us a real Christmas tree,

with candles all lit up, and presents on it for every one.'

'Yes; and I think it is ready in the little drawing-room now,' said Claude, 'for we have been forbidden to go in. We mustn't even go into the big drawing-room; and I saw Jane carrying in heaps and heaps of parcels.'

'Did you?' said Aunt Dora, who had come into the room unobserved: 'and what do you think will be inside the parcels, pray?'

'Presents, heaps and heaps of them,' replied Claude, his big blue eyes growing bigger at the thought.

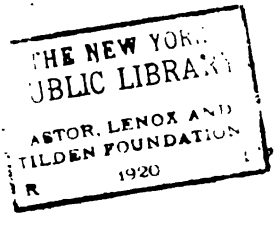
'But not all for you,' said Ralph, in his calm, superior way, which always made Ronald feel inclined to punch him; 'there's a microscope for me, and a writing-case for Isobel, and books or something or other for Ronald and Vivian; and for the little ones, about seven or eight years old, you know, there are tins of toffee. I saw cook making it.'

'Oh mother, there isn't!' said Claude, looking ready to cry at the suggestion. 'I wrote to Santa Claus and told him I wanted a man-of-war, and I posted it in the chimney myself, and it went right up.'

Mrs Osbourne laughed as she patted him on the head.

'Ralph doesn't know what he is talking about,' she said. 'Perhaps he will not get his microscope, and perhaps you will get your man-of-war; but you must wait till to-morrow night to see. I cannot tell you beforehand.'

The children set to work and transformed the hall into a perfect bower.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CHAPTER IV.

THE CHRISTMAS TREE.

THE next day was a busy one. In the morning the gardener brought in a load of evergreens; and while Aunt Dora and the maids prepared the long table in the dining-room, and superintended Davis the coachman as he carried all the drawing-room furniture into the study and the hall, with the help of the gardener's boy, so as to leave the room clear to dance in, the children set to work and transformed the hall into a perfect bower.

They twisted ivy round the balusters and polished oak stair-rails, and hung it in festoons over the sides of the gallery which ran round three sides of the house. They framed the pictures with glistening holly and scarlet berries, and crowned the great marble statue in the hall with a crown of mistletoe.

It was a very tired and grubby little party who gathered round the dinner-table, which to-day was set in the servants' hall; but Aunt Dora's pleased appreciation of their efforts made

up for all the trouble; and after a quiet hour spent in the schoolroom over story-books they were quite fresh again at three o'clock, when Mary came up to help Claude to dress, and brush Isobel's hair for her and tie her sash.

'I wish we had Etons,' said Vivian to his brother when they were alone in their own room, turning over his summer suit of dark-green cloth with rather a dissatisfied air. 'I was in Ralph's room washing my hands before dinner, and he has a proper suit, with gray trousers and a short coat with a peak at the back, just like those Charlie Strangeways had last summer.'

'That's because he's at school,' said Ronald, who was splashing away vigorously at the washhand-stand. 'Probably a lot of the fellows will have Etons on; I know they wear them in London a lot. But I think these green suits of ours are rather nice; besides, it doesn't matter what boys wear, and mother has promised to get us Etons for next summer. I say, won't Isobel look a duck in that stunning white frock, with that pale-blue sash? I hope Dorothy will grow up as pretty as she is.'

'Isobel is just perfect,' said Vivian emphatically.

'I hope Aunt Dora will let her come down to us again in spring for the Easter holidays; she will make the Strangeways look astonished. They were not at home the last time she came. They always laugh at girls, but they won't laugh at her when they see how she plays cricket. She is not like the Lister girls, who daren't catch a ball in case it hurts their fingers. I only wish Ralph were like her,' he added, going back to the vexed question of clothes. 'You should have seen his face when I told him that we had only our last year's summer suits to wear. He muttered something about "country cousins," and offered to lend me his last year's suit. It is too little for him, but he said it would just do for me.'

'And I hope you snubbed him well for his impudence. I tell you what, Vivi, he is our cousin, and we must be civil to him because of Aunt Dora and Uncle Walter and Claude and Isobel; but he is a cad, an out-and-out cad, with his airs and his conceit. So don't let me find you copying him, or I'll give you a good licking. Wear his old clothes indeed! You had better try it.'

Ronald spoke so sharply that Vivian, who

had had a sneaking hope in his heart that his brother would agree to Ralph's proposal, dropped the subject hastily, and began to scramble into the despised green suit in a very great hurry, feeling a little ashamed of himself as he did so for despising the clothes which his mother had chosen for him, and of which, until his conversation with Ralph, he had been not a little proud.

He quite forgot his momentary vexation, however, when Isobel, a slim little white fairy, with soft blue ribbons, knocked at the door to see if he were ready to go down and practise the minuet which he had promised to dance with her.

Mrs Armitage had made a point of having her boys taught to dance, for she always maintained that it taught them to hold themselves well, and hindered them from looking as if they did not know what to do with their arms and legs when they came into a room full of strangers. Vivian especially danced exceedingly nicely for a boy of his age, and later on, as Isobel and he went through the stately measures, bowing and curtsying to each other in the middle of the great drawing-room with

its brilliant lights, they made such a pretty picture that there was quite a burst of applause from the grown-ups, who had come to look after the little ones and share the fun.

'You did that splendidly, old fellow,' whispered Ronald, with real brotherly pride, when the performance was over, and Vivian came up to the corner where he was standing along with some of the bigger boys. 'I shall write and tell mother that you have taken all the ladies' hearts by storm. I heard that old dame with the eye-glasses, who is standing next Aunt Dora, ask, "Who that exceedingly nice-looking boy is?"'

'Fudge!' said Vivian, laughing; but he was pleased all the same, for he felt that he had shown Ralph that even a 'country cousin' could do some things better than he could, in spite of the fact that he did not wear an Eton suit.

The event of the evening was the Christmas tree, and there was a breathless silence as all the children gathered in the drawing-room, and were arranged in rows, the little ones in front, before the drawn curtain which separated the two rooms.

There were mysterious whisperings going on

behind the curtain, and stifled laughter; but at last the bell rang, and the lights were turned down, and in another moment the curtain flew back, and there stood the tree, blazing with coloured candles and laden with presents.

An old man, with snow-white hair and a long beard, stood beside it, wearing a white cloak which sparkled as if it were covered with hoar-frost. 'Father Christmas!' shouted all the children at once. 'Three cheers for Father Christmas!' while Claude, who, in his eagerness, had crawled very near the green tub in which the Christmas tree was planted, cried out in a tone of surprise, 'Oh, it's father; I know his boots.'

A roar of laughter greeted this discovery.

'Hush, Claude,' said his mother, catching the little fellow by his belt and swinging him back to his place beside the others. 'Take care, or Santa Claus will have no present for you. He only brings them for the children who sit still in their places.'

Then Father Christmas held up his hand for silence, and made a little speech, telling them how glad he was to see them all, and how he hoped that they were enjoying themselves, and

that they would all be good children in the year that was coming; then he took up a long white wand, with a hook at the end of it, and began to take down the presents from the tree and call out the names which were printed on them.

It seemed as if Aunt Dora must be a witch, for she had thought of just the right thing for every one. For the tiny tots there were woolly bears, and rabbits, and long-haired dolls; while for older children there were clever mechanical toys, useful glove-boxes and hand-bags, and prettily bound books. Ralph had his microscope, and Claude his man-of-war, while Ronald, who was fond of all country pursuits, hugged two beautifully bound volumes of *British Birds* in silent delight.

'I see two Brownie kodaks; I do wish one of them would come to me,' said Robin Earlison, a boy of about Vivian's age, who was sitting next him. 'I don't want to be greedy; but I do want one badly, if only I could have the luck to get it. What do you want?' he went on, trying to look as if he did not care when one of the coveted kodaks went to Pierce Dumot, a delicate-looking boy with a slight limp, who

was sitting at the other end of the row. 'But I expect you know what you are to get, for you are staying in the house, aren't you?'

Vivian scarcely heard him. His eye had fallen on a toy pistol which was hanging on one of the lower branches. It was not quite so large as those which the Strangeways boys had got, but what joy it would be if it fell to his lot! He held his breath and sat very still as one after another of the children went up to get their presents. Seven, six, five—there were only four things left on the tree now—the other kodak, the pistol, a bright blue book, and a box of soldiers.

He felt hot all over with the suspense. The soldiers could not be for him, he was too big for them, so that left only three things. Now Santa Claus was unfastening the kodak. Ah, it was Robin's name that was called, so Robin had got his heart's desire; and now there only remained the blue book and the pistol.

He was so intent listening for the next name he forgot to rise and let Robin pass to his seat, and Robin, noting the strained look on his eager face, hoped that he was not disappointed because he had not got the kodak.

Now Father Christmas had the pistol in his hand, and was turning it over seeking for the name. Would he never find it? Vivian felt angry at the noise that the other boys, who had already received their presents, were making. But his suspense did not last long. In another moment his name was called out, and the wished-for toy was in his hand.

He turned it over and over in delight, examining every part of it, while some of the other boys stretched over the seats to admire it. Evidently a toy pistol was a coveted possession.

'It's not a very big one,' said one lad, with rather a mean desire to depreciate a present which he had wished for, but which had not fallen to his lot.

'All the better,' said Ronald, who had left his seat and come round to see what his brother had got. 'Father would not have let him use it if it had been bigger.'

'It will shoot very well, all the same,' broke in the good-natured Robin, relieved to find that it was not the kodak that his companion had been longing for. 'My cousin had one like that, and he could shoot sparrows with it. He

found it very useful in the spring, when they tried to eat up all the seeds that he had sown in the garden.'

'Vivian Armitage. No, it is not for him. It is for Vivian Gray, who isn't here. This book is for Vivi.'

It was Aunt Dora's voice, and she looked over the boys' clustering heads as she spoke. 'No, Vivi dear, that is not for you,' she said, stretching out her hand. 'You are rather a little chap for that. I am afraid that mother would not thank me if I sent you home with such a dangerous toy. This book is for you; I think you will like it. It is one of Henty's. Claude got it for a birthday present a year ago, and he was quite delighted with it.'

Poor Vivian! he handed back the pistol and took the book instead with the best grace he could; but it was a bitter disappointment, and Aunt Dora's kind heart was troubled as she saw how his face fell, and with what difficulty he winked back the tears which were perilously near filling his eyes.

'It serves me right,' she thought, 'for having such a thing on the tree, only I knew that Mr Gray had no objection to Vivian having

it, and it took my fancy when I was buying the presents. I must try to remember to ask Jack if he would mind if I give Vivi one on his next birthday; he will be a year older then, and more careful.'

Thinking that a change of occupation would be the best thing to divert the little boy's thoughts, she wrapped up the pistol with its accompanying box of caps, and calling Basil Gray, Vivian's younger brother, she gave it to him, asking him to take it home, and give it to Vivian, who was in bed with a chill; then she proposed a game of charades, choosing Vivi for one of the actors; and as she saw his face brighten as he ran upstairs with the others to dress, she hoped that the disappointment was only temporary, and that by the next morning he would have forgotten all about it.

CHAPTER V.

A FALSE STEP.

BREAKFAST was late next morning, for it had been nearly midnight before the party was over and the last of the guests had gone, so Aunt Dora had made the welcome announcement, when she said good-night, that no one need be called before half-past eight, or be expected to be downstairs before nine o'clock. Isobel was dressed before that, however, and so was Vivian, and they amused themselves playing 'touch' round the gallery, making so much noise that at last Aunt Dora opened her bedroom door.

'Parties do not seem to have any power to tire you two,' she said, laughing. 'I wish my bones were as free from aches; but I must have a little less noise when Claude comes in to say his prayers, so I think I shall set you to do something for me. It just wants five minutes till breakfast-time, and perhaps in these five minutes you could carry up all the things that were brought down for the charades from

the cloakroom to the schoolroom. The maids will be busy putting the hall in order, and there will be so much dust. We can put them back in their places after breakfast.'

The two children ran obediently downstairs, followed by Ronald, who had just finished dressing; and by the time Anne appeared in the hall with the breakfast-tray, bringing with her a most tempting odour of bacon and eggs, the cloakroom was quite tidy, and the last armful of toys, rugs, and cloaks had been carried into the schoolroom.

'I think we had better take up our caps and greatcoats, Vivi,' said Ronald taking his own garments down from the peg where they were hanging. 'You know mother told us to keep our things all together in our own bedroom, so that we might find them easily when we come to pack. Your things are all over the place already; I saw your woollen gloves in the schoolroom, and your silk neckerchief on the window-ledge in the back hall.'

'What a nice time you would have if Miss Ritchie were here!' laughed Isobel, trying to see how long she could hop on one foot without losing her balance; 'she always fines us a

halfpenny for everything that we leave about. She warns us once, then if we don't put it away we have to pay the fine.'

'I'm afraid that I'd lose an awful lot of money if mother did that to me,' said Vivian. 'Somehow I never can remember to put things in their right places. As for Ronald, I think he must have been born tidy, for he can always find anything he wants, even in the dark.'

'You are much quicker, though,' said Ronald, not to be outdone in brotherly generosity; 'you can do things in half the time that I take to do them. But hurry up, old chap; run along and find your things, or the bell will ring before you get down again.'

'All right,' answered Vivian; and as he spoke he threw his coat over his arm, and ran across the front hall, and disappeared through the swing door which separated it from the back staircase, in order to gather together the rest of his belongings as he went upstairs.

But although Ronald had plenty of time to go upstairs and hang everything in his wardrobe in his leisurely way, and come down again and join the others in the dining-room

before the breakfast-bell rang, it was fully five minutes before Vivian reappeared.

'Whatever can he be doing?' asked Uncle Walter, as he rapidly cut slices of bread and served out the bacon and eggs. 'His coffee will be quite cold.'

'Gathering all his things together, in case mother fines him a halfpenny for each of them,' laughed Isobel. 'I have frightened him by telling him what Miss Ritchie does to us.'

'But you are a girl, and girls have always to learn to keep the house tidy,' said Ralph in his lofty way. 'It is of far more consequence for a woman to be tidy than for a man.—Isn't it, mother?'

'Certainly not,' said his mother; 'and if those are the notions that you are learning at St Chad's we will have to put on the halfpenny fine in the holidays to counteract them. I expect you to be just as tidy as Isobel—tidier, in fact, because you are older.'

At this moment Vivian appeared, and his entrance put an end to the discussion, for every one began laughingly to ask him if it had taken him five minutes to hang up his coat, but he did not seem to be as ready with an

answer as he generally was, and, slipping into his place between Ralph and Claude, he began to eat his breakfast hurriedly, as if to make up for lost time. He kept his face bent so steadily over his plate that no one noticed until breakfast was over that he had a big blue bruise on one of his temples, which looked as though he had struck his face against something sharp. It was little Claude who saw it first, and he cried out at once, in spite of Vivian's hurried whisper to keep quiet.

'Come here, mother, and see how Vivian has hurt himself; he has got a great bump over one of his eyes. Hadn't he better have eau de Cologne on it?'

To Claude, the idea of being petted by mother, and having nice-smelling stuff put on his knocks and bruises, quite compensated for the pain of them, and he could not understand why Vivian tried to escape upstairs before his aunt came hurriedly from the kitchen, where she had gone to have an interview with cook.

'Why, Vivi, boy,' she said, drawing him to the light, and pressing her fingers gently over the ugly mark, 'why did you not tell me of this, and have it seen to, when you came

downstairs? However did you manage to do it?'

'I slipped, and knocked it against the corner of the washstand in our room, Aunt Dora; and I am very sorry, but I broke the glass for drinking water out of. I knocked it on to the floor.'

'Yes, and you must have upset the ewer too,' said Ralph, who had been upstairs for a book, 'for I heard Mary tell Anne that your carpet was soaking, and that you had scrubbed it up with one of mother's best damask towels.'

Vivian's face turned scarlet.

'I'm very sorry,' he stammered; 'but the ewer got upset as well, and I did not know what to do. I never thought about the towel. But the ewer isn't broken, Aunt Dora.'

Mrs Osbourne felt a little troubled. She had always tried to impress upon her own children that the straightforward way, when any mishap occurred, was to come to her at once, and tell her about it; and she could not help wishing that her little nephew had done this instead of saying nothing about the accident until it was found out, and he was compelled to do so, and then try to shrink from inquiries.

But, after all, it was rather an ordeal for a little boy to come down in a strange house and publicly own to having nearly swamped his bedroom, besides having broken a glass; so she contented herself by saying, as she bathed the wounded head, 'It would have been better if you had told me at once, dear, and then I could have sent Mary to dry up the water; and, perhaps, if your head had been bathed at once there would not have been such a bump.'

She kissed him and sent him away, little dreaming how miserable the poor boy really was, or what a battle was going on in his heart.

In a moment of temptation he had taken a false step, a terribly false one, and that better self which dwells within us all was urging him to retrace it while yet there was time, and it was easy to do so. As he went upstairs to the schoolroom his mother's words of the Sunday before came into his mind: 'You have not got the courage to confess when you have done something wrong;' and, child as he was, he felt the truth of them, and he wished he could make up his mind now to confess everything to Aunt Dora.

Not that it need seem like a confession at all, for he had only to tell her that he had found a parcel in his greatcoat-pocket which was not his, and which must have been put there by some one in mistake. If he ran into his bedroom for a moment, and took the parcel from its hiding-place and put it back in his coat-pocket, he need not tell her that he had intended to keep it, and had hidden it on the top of the wardrobe, and in so doing had tipped over the chair he was standing on and overturned the ewer.

For five long minutes he stood at the top of the stairs debating with himself. He even went the length of going into his room with the half-formed intention in his mind of getting down the parcel; but Mary the housemaid was in possession, and she spoke to him rather tartly.

'Now, Master Vivian,' she began, 'be a good boy, and don't go messing all over the place again just when I've got it all cleaned up.'

Colouring at the sharp words, and at the sight of the dark, wet patch on the carpet, Vivian drew back and went into the school-room.

There every one was busy, and took little notice of him. Ralph and Ronald were curled up in two basket-chairs by the fire, deep in books, while Isobel was writing a letter, and Claude was playing happily on the floor with his man-of-war.

'Come into the bathroom and see how well she sails,' he cried; but Vivian was in no mood to attend to him. The conflicting voices were too strong in his heart, and he went out and wandered restlessly downstairs again.

Aunt Dora had finished her business with the cook, and was now seated at her desk in the study, making out lists for the stores. Looking up, she caught sight of her little nephew's white, anxious face.

'Do you feel sick, dearie?' she asked kindly, laying down her pen. 'A bump like that is a nasty thing, and if you like you can lie down for a while. Come, and I will tuck you up on the couch, and we will not let any of the others in to make a noise until lunch-time.'

'I'm not sick, thank you,' said Vivian, drawing pictures slowly with his fingers on the window-pane; 'but I want to tell you something, auntie.'

'Yes, dearie?'

At that moment Anne appeared in the doorway. 'If you please, mum, there's a young gentleman in the hall who wishes to speak to you. It is one of the young gentlemen who were here last night, and I think he has lost something.'

Mrs Osbourne rose and left the room, and Vivian followed her, sick and miserable. He would fain not have gone at all, for he knew too well who it was, and what he wanted; but something within him compelled him to go and hear what was said.

As he expected, Basil Gray stood outside, a look of anxiety on his boyish face.

'Good-morning, Mrs Osbourne. I've come very early, but mother sent me round. The fact is, I'm afraid that I have lost that parcel which you gave me to take home to Vivian—the pistol and caps, you know. It was awfully careless of me, and yet I can't think how I lost it. I put it in my greatcoat-pocket in the cloakroom, as you told me, and I never thought anything more about it until I got home, and ran upstairs to give it to Vivian, and when I put my hand in my pocket it wasn't there. Of

course it may have fallen out on the way home, but it doesn't seem likely; my pocket is too deep, and mother thinks that I may have put it in some one else's pocket. There were some coats hanging in the cloakroom just like mine, almost the same, made of gray tweed. This is the coat I had on last night,' and he unbuttoned it to let Mrs Osbourne see it better.

'Why, it is almost exactly the same as those that Ronald and you have, Vivian,' she said, stooping down to examine it. 'It is just possible that Basil may have put it in one of your pockets. Run into the cloakroom, like a good boy, and see, and we will go upstairs, and send Ralph to search his coat, although I hardly think that you could put it there, Basil, for he has a dark-brown coat, quite different from this.'

Clearly Aunt Dora had forgotten that the coats had been carried upstairs in the morning, but Vivian did not remind her of the fact. He crept away into the cloakroom and waited there, feeling as he had never felt in his life before. He realised that he had lost the chance of retrieving that first wrong step, for he knew only too well that he would never have the

courage now to confess that the pistol had been put in the wrong pocket, and that when he had found it there, as he was carrying his coat upstairs, the sudden temptation had been too strong for him, and that, almost without intending to keep it, he had hidden it where no one would dream of looking for it. At least he hoped so; but supposing Mary took it into her head to dust the top of the wardrobe? The very idea made him shiver; and, in case Aunt Dora might wonder why he was lingering downstairs, he started and ran out of the cloakroom so suddenly that he knocked up against Anne, who was dusting in the hall, and, muttering an apology, hurried up into the schoolroom.

'We took our coats upstairs in the morning, Aunt Dora,' he said breathlessly, 'and I don't see any parcel lying about.'

'No,' said his aunt; 'if it had been downstairs the maids must have noticed it, and Ronald has just been searching his own pockets and yours, and it is not there.—So, I am afraid, Basil, you must either have dropped it on your way home, or else you have put it in some other boy's coat. I will write and ask if any of them have found it, although

I think if they have, they will be honourable enough to bring it back.'

'Honourable enough!' The words fell on Vivian's ears like burning drops of lead, reminding him of some words which his father had once spoken when Ronald and he had been discussing what they meant to be when they were men.

'Well, boys,' Dr Armitage had said, putting his hands on their shoulders, 'I may not have much money to leave you, but I will give you a good education, and after that you shall choose a calling for yourselves. I do not much mind what you are, as long as you grow up God-fearing, honourable men.'

Ronald, always slow to speak, had merely answered, 'Yes, father, we'll try to be that;' but Vivian had hugged the Doctor in his impulsive way, and had promised readily what seemed to him an easy task.

Alas! what claim had he to the word 'honourable' now?

The thought stung him to the quick, and yet he had not the courage to slip downstairs to the study, after Basil had gone, and his aunt had resumed her writing, and finish the

confession which Anne's entrance had interrupted.

In spite of his self-loathing, it was a relief to him to think that the risk of discovery was averted in the meantime, for every one seemed satisfied that the pistol had not been lost in the house; so he tried recklessly to stifle his conscience, and presently, when they went out to play hide-and-seek in the garden, his voice was so loud and merry that Aunt Dora, watching them from the study window, wondered at the buoyancy of childhood, and thought with a smile of the miserable white-faced little lad of an hour ago.

CHAPTER VI.

A GAME OF HIDE-AND-SEEK.

THE grounds round Eversley were unusually large for a suburban house, and there was plenty of room for a good romping game.

First came the garden with the greenhouses and vineries, with a large tennis-green at the side, then two small paddocks almost large enough to be honoured by the name of fields, with a walk all round bordered by a row of fruit-trees. These were separated from the Heath by a double fence, enclosing a tangled hedge which in summer was a mass of wild-roses and honeysuckle, but which now lay bare and dead under its covering of snow.

At the far corner of one of the paddocks, quite hidden from the house, was a little summer-house, where in summer the children kept their gardening tools and played on rainy days, and behind it stood a fine old oak-tree, with low spreading branches, along which any one might creep, and drop down on the other side of the hedge on to the Heath.

Altogether it was a delightful place for a game of hide-and-seek, and the children found it so, as they chased each other round and round the paddock, or dodged out and in among the narrow paths which separated the vineries and potting-houses from the stables.

The game was at its height when Isobel and Vivian, hot and breathless, found a convenient hiding-place between the summer-house and the trunk of the old oak, and were resting, safe from pursuit, while Ronald and Claude were searching for them in all directions round by the stables and the kitchen-garden—Ralph, who had been taken, watching them from the shelter of the 'home.'

'This is a lovely place to hide in, and no one knows of it but myself,' said Isobel, brushing the snow from her skirts, 'and it is even better in summer, when the leaves are on the trees. When I crawl in here no one can see a trace of me, no matter how close they come. If Ralph had been on our track he might have thought of coming round the summer-house, and he might have seen our foot-prints, but I don't think Claude ever will.'

'Yes, it is a jolly place for hiding, and that

looks a jolly tree to climb,' answered Vivian, looking with longing eyes at the low spreading branches. 'Suppose we crawl along one of those branches and drop over on to the Heath, and then get "home" by the gate, wouldn't Claude look astonished? He would think we had fallen from the clouds.'

'Yes, do let us,' said Isobel, always ready for any deed of daring, and, quick as thought she was up the tree and crawling carefully along one of the wide branches.

Vivian watched her with admiring eyes.

'You are a brick, Isobel,' he said; 'you can climb as well as any boy, and yet you are so nice and dainty. I wish the Lister girls down at home saw you, they are such stiff, starched, stuck-up prigs; they think that no girl can climb and do that sort of thing and yet be what they call ladylike. If they have got to get over a wall, no matter how low it is, they cry out and make such a fuss. We fellows hate them. They spoil all the parties and picnics with their silly ways, and yet they have to be asked, for their mother lets them have awfully jolly parties, and they always ask us.'

'Silly things!' said Isobel, turning round now that she had reached the end of the branch, and trying to bob up and down so as to get a swing.

'But I am rather sorry for them all the same, for I expect they have no brothers. I always pity girls who have no brothers. I can tell them as soon as I see them, they walk so straight and proper, one on each side of their governess.'

'But supposing there are three of them,' said Vivian, laughing.

'Oh, then two walk in front, and one with the governess,' said Isobel; 'but they all have the same proper look. If you like, I'll point some of them out to you when we go down the Finchley Road.'

'You would point out girls you knew, who have no brothers,' said Vivian, trying to tease her.

'I'm not so mean,' answered Isobel, the delicate colour rising to her face at the imputation; 'but if you intend to come along this branch you had better come quickly. I see Claude's cap past the end of the hen-house.'

Vivian began crawling along the branch, but presently he stopped short.

'What's that?' he asked, pointing to something that looked like a bit of dirty rag, which stuck out of the side of a thick branch just over his head. Isobel frowned and hesitated.

'You make me tell you all my secrets,' she said at last, laughing; 'but if I tell you, you must promise, honour bright, not to tell any one else.'

'I promise,' said Vivian solemnly, looking curiously at the odd-looking bundle, which was partly covered with snow.

'Well, then, that's my very own private hiding-place. I found it out by myself, and no one else knows of it. I was up here one day last summer, and was walking along this branch and holding on to that one—you can do that in summer, when the branches are not slippery—and all at once my fingers went into a hole. The wood felt quite rotten, and I broke it away, and made it bigger, and I found that the whole branch was hollow, so I began to use it to put things in—story-books and things. Then, on half-holidays when I

'But what is that bundle of rags for?' went on Vivian, putting up his hand to pull them down.

wanted to be alone, I used to climb up here, and sit and read, and nobody knew where I was.'

'But what is that bundle of rags for?' went on Vivian, putting up his hand to pull them down.

'Oh, don't touch them!' cried Isobel, almost overbalancing herself in her anxiety; 'that is an old duster that I borrowed from Mary. I stuck it in to prevent the rain and snow getting inside the branch and making the hole all wet. It would spoil my books, you see, if it got damp.'

'I won't touch it; I just want to see,' said Vivian, stretching his neck and regarding the place with keen interest. 'Do you ever keep things in it just now?'

'No, never,' said Isobel; 'it's far too wet; besides, it would be no fun sitting up a tree at Christmas time.'

At that moment Claude caught sight of Isobel's bright scarlet tam o' shanter over the top of the summer-house, and, with a shout to Ronald, he bore down on them as fast as his fat little legs would let him.

'Caught!' cried Ronald as he raced up;

'fairly caught, for you cannot get off that branch without our getting hold of you.'

'Can't we?' cried Isobel mischievously, as she rocked her end of the branch gently up and down. 'Just wait and see.'

'Let me go first, Isobel,' said Vivian, crawling along to where she stood, and trying to pass her; 'the ground may be harder than we think, and my boots are thicker than yours, so I won't feel the jump so much, and you can see how I get on.'

'Fudge!' replied Isobel, refusing to give up her point of vantage. 'It looks high from here; but if I let myself down, and hold on by my arms, I can drop quite easily. Robin Earlison and I did it one day last summer, and got round to the "home" before the others knew where we had gone.'

She was stooping down preparing to lower herself, when all at once there was a sudden crack, and, before either of the children could move, the branch gave way, and fell with its burden on the hard path, which at this point bordered the Heath.

Ronald in great alarm ran forward and tried to find an opening in the thick, snow-

covered hedge through which he could squeeze himself.

'Are you hurt?' he cried anxiously, finding that his efforts only resulted in scratched hands and ruffled hair. 'I can't get through, but I will run into the house and call somebody if you are.'

'No, we're not,' answered Vivian, scrambling to his feet, anxious only that the news of this new escapade should not reach his aunt's ears; for, although no one had said so, he felt that she would not like the idea of any of the children getting out of bounds in this way.

'Then we shall come and catch you,' shouted Ronald, and Vivian could hear the sound of his retreating footsteps going round by the apple-tree. He had answered for Isobel and himself when he had said that neither of them were hurt; but Isobel, who had sat up at first, was now lying back on the path again, with a funny, dazed look in her eyes.

'You're not hurt, Isobel, are you?' he asked, kneeling down beside her, and feeling frightened all at once; 'for if you are, I had better run for Aunt Dora.'

'No, I don't think I am,' said Isobel bravely,

although she did not attempt to move, 'not really hurt, but I think I have knocked the back of my head against something.'

'Can't you sit up?' said Vivian. 'If you could just sit up, and get into the house, we would bathe it with tepid water. That's good for a bump I know. Mother always bathes Dorothy's head with tepid water if she knocks it.'

'I'll try,' said the little girl, and with his help she struggled to her feet, but when she tried to walk she turned so sick and giddy she was glad to sit down on the broken branch again. She was still sitting there when Ronald ran up triumphantly, out of breath with his long run round by the lodge. His look of triumph faded away, however, when he saw her.

'Hallo, Isobel!' he exclaimed, 'I thought you were not hurt. You haven't broken your arm or anything?'

'Of course she hasn't,' answered his brother impatiently. 'She is only feeling queer because she fell on the hard path and bumped her head. She'll be all right in a minute.'

But Ronald did not like the look on his cousin's face.

'I think I'll just run in for Aunt Dora,' he said; and, without heeding Isobel's protest, he turned and ran off.

Aunt Dora had gone out, however, and when he told his tale to Ralph, who had grown tired of waiting for the others to be taken, and had gone indoors, he only laughed at his cousin's grave face and anxious voice.

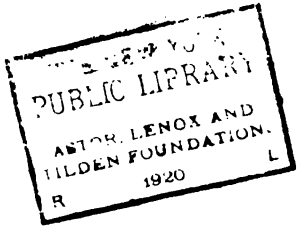
'Don't be a muff,' he said in his languid, patronising way. 'If you were at school you would learn not to be so squeamish over every little knock that every one gets. I expect Isobel will be all right by now, and it will teach both Vivian and her not to get out of the garden like that. Father would be in a wax if he knew, I can tell you.'

Ronald felt inclined to remind Ralph that, if he were not in the habit of feeling squeamish over other people's knocks, he made quite enough fuss over his own, for Isobel or Claude would laugh over a bruise or a cut which would send their elder brother into the house in tears; but he remembered that he was Ralph's guest, so like a gentleman he kept back the hasty words, and set off in silence to see how it was faring with the party outside.

He met them just beyond the lodge; and, although Isobel was walking slowly, the colour had come back to her face, and she replied cheerily to his anxious question that she was all right, and that her head did not ache so badly now.

Perhaps if Mrs Osbourne had come home in time for the children's early dinner she might not have been deceived so easily by the little girl's assurances; but, thinking that the children would be quite safe as long as Ronald and Ralph were with them, she had stayed to spend the afternoon with an old aunt of Mr Osbourne's whom she found in bed with a bad attack of bronchitis; and although Anne, who waited on the children at dinner-time, noticed the child's dull eyes and listless manner, she only said, 'Surely you are not hungry, Miss Isobel,' as she took away her almost untouched plate; and Isobel, after dawdling about with Claude for a little, helping him to set out all his soldiers in a row on the edge of the bath, ready to salute as his new man-of-war was launched, lay down with a story-book on the schoolroom sofa, and soon fell into a heavy sleep.

Isobel lay down with a story-book on the schoolroom sofa, and soon fell into a heavy sleep.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The frost had given way, and the afternoon was dull and wet, so there was no prospect of getting out, and employment had to be found indoors. Soon Ralph, tired of his book, and more sociably inclined than usual, proposed that they should go up to an unused room at the top of the house, where he had a carpenter's bench and a set of tools, and begin to hollow out a log which he intended making into a boat. Both Ronald and he were good craftsmen, and they were soon busy with hammer and chisel, while Vivian found employment for his fingers in whittling the corners off a piece of wood which was destined to form a funnel.

The noise of hammering prevented much talking, and his own thoughts did not seem to be very pleasant, for the cheery whistling, which Mrs Armitage was wont to say always told her when Vivian was about, soon stopped, and a frown gathered on his handsome little face. Presently he laid down the piece of wood and left the room.

The lie that he had told, or acted rather, in letting his aunt believe that he knew nothing of the lost pistol was weighing heavily

on his conscience, and the remembrance of the paper parcel lying on the top of the wardrobe in his room, ready to be found by any prying servant, haunted him.

The very thought of the pistol was hateful to him now. He wondered why he had ever wanted it, and he wished that he could get rid of it anyhow, anywhere. But to do so was not so easy. He was never out alone, or he might have thrown it into one of the ponds on the Heath; and although the idea of burying it came into his mind, he remembered what Isobel had told him about Monarch the great watch-dog hiding bones in the corners of the flower-beds whenever he had a chance, and scraping them up again just when the gardener had sown some special kind of seed there or bedded out some favourite plant. No, it certainly would not be safe to hide the packet in the ground.

Suddenly a new idea flashed through his brain, and he quickened his steps. The hole that Isobel had let him see—that would be the very place to hide it in. If once he could put it there, without any one seeing him, and replace the old duster, it might lie for

months before it was discovered; and even if it were discovered no one could trace the theft back to him. He would push it well along inside the hollow branch, so that even Isobel would not be likely to find it. How stupid of him not to have thought of it sooner! But there was time to do it yet, if only Aunt Dora would stay out a little longer. It was getting dark, and the gardeners would have gone home to tea. It was a splendid chance, if only he could slip out without being seen.

While these thoughts were passing through his mind he had gone to his room, and noiselessly locked the door and drawn a chair up to the wardrobe. He dared not put the chair on the washstand, as he had done in the morning, in case of another accident, but he dragged his father's portmanteau forward and lifted it on to the chair, and when he was mounted on that he found he could, with an effort, just touch the parcel with the tips of his fingers. He looked round for something which would raise him a little higher. The travelling-rug—but that had been left downstairs; a pillow—that would do. Quick as thought he jumped to the floor, and pulled one of the pillows

from under the coverlet. Taking off his slippers in case he soiled it, he mounted the unsteady pile. How soft and uneven the pillow was. His feet slipped and sank in it. And there were footsteps on the staircase. Was it Anne, or was it Aunt Dora come back? With a desperate effort he raised himself on tiptoe, and seized the parcel; and then, overbalancing himself, he fell with a crash, carrying both the pillow and the portmanteau with him.

At that moment a knock came to the door.

'What in all the living world are you doing, Master Vivian?'

It was only Anne after all, and Vivian breathed freely again.

'One moment, Anne,' he cried; and, quick as lightning, he pushed the pillow under the coverlet again and returned the portmanteau to its place. Then he hid the little packet containing the pistol and caps under his jacket, and unlocked the door.

Anne, tired of waiting, had gone on to Ralph's bedroom, and when she came back Vivian was gone and the room was empty.

'Whatever has he been up to now?' she said to herself, as she noted the tumbled bed-

clothes and the overturned chair, which Vivian in his haste had forgotten to pick up. 'That boy is up to mischief, or my name is not Anne Martin. This is the second time that he has fallen in this room to-day, and it's clear that it was that chair he fell from.'

So saying, she picked up the chair, and, getting on to it, she proceeded to take a survey of the top of the wardrobe and the bed-hangings, but she found no trace of anything to arouse her suspicions; and with a shake of her head at the sight of the dust which had accumulated since she looked up there last, she got down again, muttering to herself as she did so, 'If that young gentleman lived in this house I would see that the mistress put an end to the overturning of ewers and crumpling of pillows, especially when he was sleeping in the very best bedroom.'

CHAPTER VII.

ANOTHER INVITATION.

'WELL, chickens,' said Mrs Osbourne, as she came into the schoolroom about half-past four, 'and what have you been doing all afternoon? Did you think I had gone off altogether and left you?'

The gas had not been lit, but the room looked warm and cosy by the light of a blazing fire.

Claude looked up from the hearthrug, where he was looking at pictures in the ruddy glow. 'The others are up in the top room, making a boat,' he answered, 'and Isobel's asleep on the sofa.'

At the sound of her name the little girl roused herself and sat up rubbing her eyes.

'Why, Isobel,' said her mother, 'what is the matter with you? You are not generally a sleepy-head.'

'I lay down with a story-book after dinner, and I must have gone to sleep,' said Isobel vaguely. 'I suppose it was the party.'

She seemed to have forgotten all about her tumble, and the explanation made her mother laugh.

'It is a good thing that it is holiday time, missy,' she said, 'if you are going to sleep half the day after every party. I think we will have to send you to bed two hours earlier on Monday night, for I have just got an invitation for all of you to go to Mrs Seton-Kinaird's on Tuesday. She is going to give a very fine party indeed, and I am sure you will enjoy it. There is to be a conjurer and performing dogs.'

'Oh mother!' cried Claude in great excitement, springing to his feet, 'and am I asked too? I have never seen dogs perform in my life.'

'Yes, you too,' said his mother, smiling, 'and Ronald and Vivian. Mrs Seton-Kinaird asked you all to come.'

'To come where?' asked Ralph, who had just entered the room, followed by Ronald.

'To a party with performing dogs and a conjurer,' replied Claude; 'and, Ronald, you are asked too, and Vivian. Isn't it a pity you are going home?'

'Perhaps they needn't go,' said Isobel. 'Couldn't

you write to Aunt Margaret, mother, and beg her to let them stay until Wednesday?'

'Perhaps I may,' said Mrs Osbourne, smiling. —'What would you say to that, eh, Ronald? Or do you think that you will have had enough of London by that time, and be wearying to get home?'

'Indeed I won't,' said Ronald eagerly. 'I would love to stay, and so would Vivian, I know, if mother will let us. It is awfully good of you to ask us.'

'Where is Vivian?' asked his aunt, noticing his absence for the first time. 'Ah, here he comes,' as Vivian came running up the back stairs.—'Why, you are quite wet, my boy,' she said in surprise as she laid her hand on his shoulder. 'You surely have never been outside in that pouring rain?'

'I ran out into the summer-house to see if I had not left my knife there,' said Vivian, wriggling from under her grasp. 'It was not very wet, auntie, and I ran the whole way.'

'All the same, you must go and change your coat and your stockings,' said Mrs Osbourne, running her hand rapidly over his clothes, 'and your knickerbockers too, I think. Don't run out

in such rain again, dearie, for you are quite damp, and there are a lot of colds about. I don't want you to catch one, for I have heard of more gaieties for you. But run off now; you shall hear all about it when you come back.'

'There is a splendid party at Mrs Seton-Somebody's,' cried Claude, always eager to be the first to tell any piece of news, 'and we are all invited, and mother is going to write to Aunt Margaret to ask if Vivian and you can stay.'

Fond as he was of parties, Vivian almost hoped that his mother would insist on Ronald and him returning home on the day that had been originally fixed, for the thought of the stolen pistol still lay like a load on his mind, in spite of the fact that it was no longer in the house, and he felt that he would never shake the load off until he was safely home, and it was left behind him—left hidden in the hollow branch which Isobel had shown him that afternoon.

For that was the true errand that had taken him out in the rain, although he had glanced hastily into the summer-house for an excuse, in case any one asked him what he had been doing, and then he had seen an old cap lying on the floor, and wrapped it round the pistol to

protect it from the wet. Then it had been an easy matter to slip behind the summer-house, in the growing dusk, and jump up on the branch, and pull the old duster out of its place, and drop the bundle into the hole, and then close it up again, and run back to the schoolroom with the easy lie about the knife upon his lips.

'And indeed it was not a lie at all,' he reasoned to himself, as he slipped off his wet clothes and tried to rub out the marks which the wet branches had left on them, 'for I had lost my knife, and I did look into the summer-house, and it might have been there;' and with a feeling of relief that the parcel was now safe from any risk of discovery by the servants, he went into the schoolroom and joined the others at the tea-table.

Saturday morning brought a reply to Mrs Osbourne's letter, and loud were the exclamations of delight when she announced at breakfast-time that Aunt Margaret consented to the two boys staying a couple of days longer.

Even Vivian felt glad for the moment, for the party on Tuesday night bade fair to eclipse any that even Ralph had been to as yet; and

now that the excitement of their own Christmas tree was over, the Eversley children could talk of little else.

Mrs Seton-Kinaird was a rich young widow who lived in a large old-fashioned house at the top of the Heath. She had had two children, a boy and a girl, but the girl had died of consumption, and the boy was very delicate; and his mother, haunted by the fear that someday she might lose him as she had lost his sister, indulged him more, perhaps, than was wise. His lungs were weak, and as soon as the Christmas holidays were over she intended to shut up her house and go to Egypt with him, in order to avoid the cold spring months at home.

The doctors, indeed, had advised her to go away in December; but Cedric, as the boy was called, hated the idea. He was tired, poor little man, of being dragged from one foreign country to another in search of the health that did not come, and he had cried so bitterly at the prospect of spending Christmas away from home, that his mother had given in to him, and had promised him this birthday party, agreeing to have performing dogs, or conjurers,

or any novelty that he liked, so long as he made up his mind to the prospect of the journey afterwards.

The children at Eversley knew him slightly. Claude and Isobel often met him on the Heath, walking with his mother or his governess; but the friendship did not grow rapidly, their boisterous health and high spirits rather alarmed him, for he did not care to rush all over the grass, playing hide-and-seek among the bushes, while they, on their part, soon grew tired of his sober face and peevish, complaining ways.

'He's a silly, fretful boy,' said Isobel emphatically, when, after listening to a detailed account of the beauties of Mrs Seton-Kinaird's house, and the wonderful playroom full of marvellous toys that Cedric possessed, Vivian had asked her what kind of boy he was. 'He is always grumbling about something. Just now it is because his mother and he are going away to Egypt, to live on the Nile in a boat, and do no lessons. Catch me grumbling if Dr Robson said that I was to do that. Only think of having no lessons to do, and seeing the Sphinx and the Pyramids!'

'Ah, but my girlie, you are quite well, and

don't know what it is to be always tired and have bad headaches, as poor Cedric has,' said Mrs Osbourne, who had overheard the last remark. 'It is one thing having a holiday when one is strong and able to enjoy it, and another thing to have to take one when one is too tired to find pleasure in anything.'

Isobel coloured at the gentle tone of reproof, and thought rather rebelliously that if her mother only knew how her head was aching at that moment, or what queer little jerks of pain had been running up and down her back for the last two days, she would not have spoken like that, but would think her a brave girl for running about and making so little fuss. Then, next moment, being a conscientious little mortal, and having a habit of looking her faults straight in the face, she owned to herself that she was only making no fuss because they were all going to the Hippodrome that evening with father, a very great treat indeed, for Mr Osbourne was generally too busy to pay much attention to the children, and she knew that if she told her mother how funny she felt, she would probably make her stay quietly at home and go early to bed.

So she held her tongue like a Spartan, although her head grew worse and worse, and went to the Hippodrome along with the others. But by that time the pain was almost unbearable, and the glare of the electric light hurt her eyes so badly that sometimes she could hardly help crying out. She was glad to change seats with Ralph, and sit close to a pillar which he declared spoilt his view, and lean her burning head against it, for it felt nice and cool, and its shadow shielded her eyes from the light.

If her mother had been there she would have noticed the poor child's discomfort; but being, as she had laughingly said before they started, too old for entertainments of that kind, except when she was needed as a chaperone, she had gone to sit for a few hours with poor old Miss Osbourne, whose bronchitis did not as yet show any signs of improvement. As it was, when the merry party returned full of excitement at all the wonderful things they had seen—the performing seals, and dancing goats, and the cyclist who rode a bicycle along a tight-rope with his hands tied behind him, the little girl's flushed cheeks and bright eyes passed

unnoticed; and when, next morning, she felt too sick and queer to get up, and had to confess how badly her head ached, her mother did not feel at all anxious, thinking that the excitement and the late hours had been too much for her, and that a day spent quietly in bed, with nothing to eat but bread-and-milk, would soon put matters right again.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BROKEN WINDOWS.

'I HOPE you won't be lonely, Pussy,' said Mrs Osbourne, looking into Isobel's bedroom for a moment on her way to dress for church. 'I would have stayed at home with you myself if it had not been New Year's Day. You know how father likes us all to be at church together to begin the New Year, and Claude could not go if I did not, and he would be so disappointed. He had his little red prayer-book laid out before breakfast.'

'Yes, here it is,' said Claude, who had come into the room on tiptoe behind his mother, looking like a jolly little Jack Tar in his long blue trousers and new reefer coat, into whose pocket the bright-red prayer-book—a present from his godmother—was squeezed; 'and I have got markers in at all the places. Ronald put them in.'

'Ronald is very good to you,' said his mother. 'And now that you are such a big boy, and

have a prayer-book of your own, you will try and sit quite still, and not fidget in the sermon.'

'I won't, if it isn't very long,' answered Claude gravely, setting his fat legs wide apart and shaking his head until the wealth of golden curls which covered it bobbed up and down like yellow fluff; 'but if it gets very tiresome, mother, you must let me move my legs about just a little; they get all prickly if they keep still too long.'

Both Isobel and her mother laughed.

'He means pins and needles,' said Isobel. 'I remember I used to get them if my legs hung down too long.'

'I will give you two footstools, sir, and then you will have no excuse for fidgeting,' said Mrs Osbourne; 'and perhaps, who knows, if you sit very still for the first ten minutes of the sermon there may be a picture somewhere in mother's prayer-book, which she will let you look at.—But I must be off and get on my bonnet, for the carriage will be round in no time. Good-bye, dearie. I will send Anne up with some story-books for you, although I think it would be better for your

head if you lay quite quiet, and did not read.'

Bending down and giving her little daughter a kiss, Mrs Osbourne left the room, followed by Claude; and a few moments afterwards Isobel heard the carriage come round, then the sound of voices and footsteps on the gravel, then the door was shut, and the carriage drove away, and a stillness fell over the house. She felt very drowsy; and when presently a tap came to the door she did not turn her head, but murmured a sleepy 'Thank you,' as some one —Anne, she supposed—laid down an armful of books on the little bamboo table at the side of her bed, and stole quietly away.

It was not Anne, however, who had brought them, but Vivian, who had been seized with such a violent fit of coughing at the last moment that he had been left behind. He had clearly caught a little cold; and as it was a beautifully sunny morning, his aunt wisely thought that a sharp run round the garden would be better for him than sitting for an hour and a half in a heated church. Besides, he could run up now and then and see how Isobel was getting on. She charged him not to sit all

morning in her room; but she felt that it would not be so lonely for the little girl if she knew that he was at home too.

New Year's Day is generally a day of good resolutions. We have turned over a page in our lives, as it were, and the old sheet with its blurs and its blots lies behind us. It cannot be recalled, or changed, no matter what mistakes, or failures, or sins are written upon it; and we turn with relief to the fresh page which lies so stainless, and smooth, and white before us, and we determine that, so far as in us lies, we will fill it with records of more strenuous endeavours after goodness, with fewer blots and rubbed-out lines. It is a solemn call to 'forget' the things that are behind, and reach forward to those that are before; and our hearts are dull indeed if we do not respond to it.

Vivian was not slow to feel the influence of the day. He felt that there was so much that he wanted to forget, and he tried, as it were, to turn over this black page of his life and glue it down, forgetting, as so many of us do, that the blots on the old page are apt to show through the paper, and reappear on

the nice clean sheet in front of us, unless we have repented of the sins that caused them, and have done everything in our power to repair the trouble and mischief that they have caused.

It was Sunday morning, and he determined to spend it as he thought the old Rector at home would say Sunday morning ought to be spent by a boy who could not go to church; so, after he had carried up the books to Isobel's room, he went to the schoolroom, and taking down a big illustrated copy of *The Children of the Bible*, which belonged to Claude, he turned over the pages and tried to settle down to read. But the stories brought with them the thought of his mother, who had read them to Ronald and him when they were younger, and with the thought came the remembrance of the guilty secret which he must carry home with him on Wednesday, and the ugly words 'Thief' and 'Liar' floated through his brain.

Restlessly he pushed aside the book and wandered to the window. The sun was shining brightly outside, and the hoar-frost on the grass was beginning to melt. Aunt Dora had

said that he might go out, and anything was better than hanging about idly, listening to thoughts which he could not silence; so he ran upstairs for his coat and muffler, peeping into Isobel's room as he passed; but although she was tossing about in her bed she seemed to be asleep, for she took no notice of him.

Outside in the garden all was quiet. The greenhouses were locked up, so were the stables; but Monarch the big black retriever, which was kept as a watch-dog, and was looked after by Mason the coachman, was wide-awake in his kennel in the yard, and allowed the little boy to make friends with him.

For some time he amused himself with the great curly animal, which, although it could bark so fiercely at every errand-boy or beggar who came to the door, was in reality the mildest-tempered dog in the world. Mason's house adjoined the stables, and presently Mrs Mason appeared. Evidently she was going out for the day, for she wore her best bonnet and cloak, and, after locking the door behind her, she proceeded to hide the key under an old mat on the doorstep, where Mason could find it when he came back with the carriage.

All at once she noticed Vivian, who had run into the kitchen for a piece of stale bread, and was now proceeding to break it into small pieces, and hold them out to Monarch, so as to make him jump the full length of his chain.

'Please do not give him any more, sir,' she said. 'We have had to stop the children giving him scraps. He got so fat and lazy as never was, and Mason couldn't think what was the matter with him till he found out that little Master Claude had coaxed cook to gather all the bones and broken victuals from the late dinner, and that he used to carry them out and hide them in the straw in the kennel, and then watch to see Monarch hunting for them. Very vexed the poor little kind-hearted gentleman was, too, when he was told that he mustn't do it; but 'tis true what Mason says, that if a dog is to be a watch-dog it mustn't have more than two meals a day, given regular, with a bone thrown in once or twice a week as a relish.'

The worthy woman hurried away, afraid that she might miss her bus; and Vivian, finding that the great watch-dog went quietly back

to his kennel now that he had no more morsels to offer him, set out to look round the greenhouses, in the hope of finding Joe Flinders the gardener's boy; but all was quiet and deserted, so he went on to the paddock and amused himself for some time throwing stones at a broken bottle which some one had apparently thrown over from the Heath, and which had lodged in the branches of an elm-tree which stood next the great oak behind the summer-house.

He tried to hit it, but without success, and suddenly he remembered the toy pistol lying hidden in the hole close by.

Dare he take it out and try it?

He hesitated for a moment, and looked all round. Not a soul was in sight, and the house was quite hidden; no one could see him from the windows. The clock on the church tower at the top of the Heath rang out twelve, so he had a full half-hour before any one came out of church. Here was an opportunity for trying, for once, the toy for which he had forfeited so much.

For a moment the thought that it was Sunday held him back, but the temptation

was too great. He slipped behind the summer-house, and swung himself into the branches of the oak-tree, and soon he stood on the path again with the parcel in his hand. He had never undone the paper and string in which the pistol and caps were rolled, but he did so now with fingers which trembled, partly through haste, partly through fear of discovery.

The wrappings were off at last, and he fingered the shining little toy lovingly, wondering if after all he dare not smuggle it into the portmanteau and take it home with him. If once he had it there, he thought to himself, there were plenty of places where he could hide it, and no one need know anything about it.

Then he opened the box of caps, and carefully loaded it. He knew the way—Fergus Strangeways had shown him that—and he remembered also that Fergus had told him that his father had said that the pistols were quite safe, for 'the caps were made up of a pinch of powder and one or two pellets that wouldn't hurt a baby.' The thought reassured him as he raised the pistol to his eye, and cocked the trigger in a knowing way. All the same, he felt a little

nervous in case there should be a very loud report.

Taking the best aim he could at the broken bottle, he drew the trigger, but a harmless *click* was all that followed. He tried again and again, but with no better result. Clearly the caps had become damp, in spite of the fact that the parcel had been wrapped in the old ragged cap which he had found in the summer-house. Taking it out, he proceeded to pick a fresh one from the very middle of the box, where it might be drier. Putting the fresh cap in the pistol, he drew the trigger carelessly, half expecting that it would not go off.

But this time the cap was all right, and there was a flash and a sharp report, and then a crash of broken glass.

Deceived by the failure of his first attempts, he had foolishly taken no proper aim, forgetting that the summer-house stood straight in front of him, and the pellets had gone through two of its windows, shivering the glass into a thousand fragments.

There were four panes of glass in the little house, representing, so Isobel had told him, the four seasons, for if one looked through them

in order, everything took on a different tint, just as it did in the four seasons of the year. There was green for spring, and deep-red for summer, yellow for autumn, and blue for winter. The children were fond of playing here, and of choosing the colours they liked best, and claiming that window with the seat under it for their own; and Vivian had always chosen the amber yellow, which threw such a warm tint over everything, and made one dream of the mellow days of autumn. Now, however, there was nothing but a hideous gap where the autumn window had been, and Claude's favourite, the bright green spring one, was utterly destroyed as well.

For a moment Vivian stood rooted to the spot, gazing at the havoc he had wrought with blanched face and great frightened eyes, and then he hastily picked up the piece of brown paper and the ragged cap which were lying at his feet, and crumpled them into a parcel anyhow with the pistol and the caps. If only he could get them hidden away again, he thought in his terror, and steal into the house, perhaps no one would know that he had been out.

To replace them in their hiding-place was easily done, but when, with shaking limbs he had swung himself down from the tree, and was turning to run into the house, the sound of a low cough made him start suddenly and face quickly round again.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MAN IN THE SUMMER-HOUSE.

THERE, to his horror, looking through the gap which had been filled by Claude's spring window, and framed, as it were, by the jagged points of glass which were still sticking to the framework, was a rough-looking man, with a stubbly beard, and a dirty white muffler twisted loosely round his neck. He had only one eye; at least, if the other were there it was hidden by a greasy green patch which was tied round his head by a piece of old string, while his rough, sandy-coloured hair looked as if it had not been touched by a brush and comb for years.

Clearly this strange-looking individual must have been in the summer-house all the time, and have seen the whole of Vivian's movements, and the little boy found himself wondering, in spite of his terror, how he had escaped being struck by a pellet or cut by a fragment of broken glass. He would fain have turned and run away, but something in the man's one

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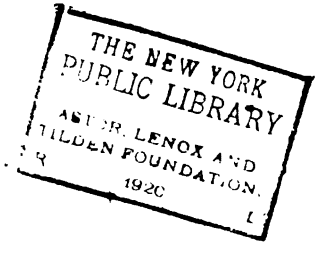
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visible eye held him rooted to the spot, and he remained stock-still, furtively rubbing one foot against the other, longing, and yet half-dreading, to hear the stranger speak and to discover how much he had seen.

'A pretty mess you've made of it, young gentleman,' said the man at last with a chuckle; 'and what will the gentleman as you're staying with say when he sees all this?'

'It was a mistake,' stammered Vivian, at a loss what other answer to make.

'Ho, ho! a mistake was it, young gentleman? And was it a mistake that you took the pistol out of the hole, and put it back again after the smash, looking as scared as ever was, instead of bringing it boldly out of the house with you, like as you would have done if it had been all square?'

'You've no business whose pistol it is, or where I got it,' said Vivian defiantly, driven to bay by this unexpected retort; 'and, besides, you have no right to be in my uncle's garden, and I'll tell him about you as soon as he comes home from church.'

The man laughed unpleasantly.

'All very good, young sir,' he said; 'but

what if I take the first step, and go in and volunteer to tell him all about those blessed windows, and about how nearly you shot me; and, to prove that I am speaking the truth, what if I let him see that nice little hole up there behind, and show him what is hid in it?'

Now, as his mother had said to him on Christmas morning, Vivian had plenty of physical courage, and under other circumstances he would have been quite brave enough to have watched the man until some one either came into the garden or passed outside on the Heath, to whom he might have shouted for help; but, as she had also told him, he was sadly wanting in that other kind of courage which 'grown-ups' call 'moral,' and the mere threat of exposure made him cringe and beg for mercy from this unwashed, unshaved, evil-looking stranger.

'Oh, don't tell—please don't tell,' he entreated. 'It was really a mistake; but I will be punished if it is found out. If you will not tell, and will go quietly away, I'll give you five shillings. They are in the house, but I can soon get them, and they are my very own; my father gave them to me when I came here, and I have never spent them.'

The man laughed again, with a look that was not good to see.

He had lain concealed in the summer-house all morning with an object in view which seemed as if it would be very difficult to carry out, and things had played into his hands in a manner that he had little expected. From his place of concealment he had watched all Vivian's movements from the time he had come out of the house, and he knew that he had the frightened boy in his power, and could work on his feelings as he would.

'Five shillings!' he said contemptuously; 'five shillings aren't enough to shut my mouth. You might have killed me with that blooming pistol of yours; more than likely you would have, had I not seen how you were aiming, and lain down on the floor. No, no; you wouldn't be hiding that pistol if you had come by it in any right way, and I'll consider it my dooty to report to the master of the house, no matter what the consequences be to myself.'

The man spoke in such a tone of virtuous indignation that Vivian felt that his uncle would believe his word at once, in spite of

his ragged clothes and the dirty green patch over his eye.

'How much would it take to make you go quietly away, and hold your tongue?' he asked. 'I have more money in my purse at home, and if you gave me your address I would send it to you.'

The man shook his head in a decided way.

'It would take pounds and pounds to make me hold my tongue,' he said, 'for I am a determined man when once I have made up my mind what it is my dooty to do. But I tell you what, young gentleman. There is one little job which I came in here to do, but which I may not have a chance of doing—'twould keep me too long, and I am a very busy man. Perhaps if you could manage it for me I might not tell after all. It's a very simple thing, and I only promised to do it to please a little cripple girl of mine at home.'

'And what is it?' asked Vivian eagerly, catching at any straw which promised escape from the disclosures which he felt were staring him in the face.

'Well,' said the man slowly, and his voice sounded quite soft and gentle, 'I make a living

by breeding dogs, and I have a little cripple girl at home, and she has nothing to do but to lie in bed all day, and it gets wearisome for her at times; and to cheer her up I sometimes put the puppies on her bed, and she plays with them, and she grows as fond of them as if they were human beings like herself. There was one black retriever puppy in particular, which was born on her birthday, which I used to tell her she treated as if it were a baby, for she would save bits of her own supper for it, and it grew so fond of her it always slept at the foot of her bed. If I had been rich I would always have kept it for her; but I am a poor man, young gentleman, and when it got big it ate a lot, and I had to sell it, and the parting well-nigh broke Tottie's heart. The coachman here came and bought it for his master for a watch-dog, and whenever I come on business to this part of London—I live down Shoreditch way—Tottie always asks if I have seen her pet. Generally I have to tell her "No," for the coachman here is a disobliging cove, an' if he saw a poor man like me hanging about the gates he'd order me off; but to-day, being

Tottie's birthday, an' the dog's too of course, an' I happening to come up to 'Ighgate on business, she gave me two of her birthday cakes as a neighbour had given her, an' she says, "Daddy," she says, "you'll see Monarch, an' you'll give him these from me, an' when I am eating mine at supper-time I'll know he'll be eating his share.'

The man paused, and drew two curious little brown buns from his pocket.

'What queer-looking cakes!' said Vivian, who had grown interested in the story in spite of his own fears.

'Yes,' replied the man; 'these are German cakes. The woman as lives below us, and is kind to Tottie, is a German, and she bakes the most curious cakes. She has a shop, and makes quite a business of it. Tottie just loves this kind, and to think of the precious child being so unselfish, and denying herself, and she with such a poor appetite too, and sending two of them to Monarch, and here am I spending my whole Sunday away from her, waiting for a chance to give them to the dog. I climbed the fence, and laid myself open to being took up, just to try and please the

darling, for I couldn't bear to go home and meet her sweet face when she says, "Daddy, have you given my cakes to Monarch?" and I having to say "No."'

The man drew his ragged sleeve across his eyes.

'It's very hard, young master,' he added in a broken voice, 'that an honest man can't go boldly up to the coachman's door, and ask to see the dog, without being called names, and turned away as a beggar, just because he's poor, and his coat isn't as whole as it might be.'

'I could manage to give the dog your little girl's cakes,' said Vivian eagerly. He was very kind-hearted, and, besides, he began to see a way of escape for himself. 'I could give him the cakes, only you would have to promise'——

'To promise not to tell about the window?' interrupted the man, looking up with a gleam in his eye. 'I would gladly promise you that, for, after all, it is none of my business. So we will make a bargain. If you will take these cakes, and give them to Monarch about the darkening, just when my little girl is having her supper—for it will please her to

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think that he is eating them then—I will go right away, and never tell a word about all I have seen this morning; no, not though I read about it in the papers. But you must give me your Bible oath as you will be true, and give them to the dog, and not guzzle them yourself.'

'Oh, you may be sure that I won't eat them,' said Vivian hastily, shuddering at the mere thought of eating anything that had been in contact with the man's dirty coat; 'and I promise to give them to Monarch. I can easily run out at tea-time, and put them in his kennel.'

'Say "I take my Bible oath not to eat them myself, and to give them to the dog at tea-time,"' said the man sternly, 'else I'll stay here and tell the gentleman.'

Vivian hesitated. To say that he took his Bible oath seemed to him very much like swearing, and that would be to sink one step deeper into the mire of despair and wickedness into which he had already fallen.

Just then the clock on the Heath rang out the half-hour.

'You'd better choose quick, for they'll be

coming home from church,' said the man, who had no desire to be found in the grounds, and who yet wished to carry his point.

The warning had its due effect on Vivian. With trembling haste he stumbled over the hated words, and then, reaching out his hand for the two little cakes, he thrust them into his trousers-pocket, and turned and ran into the house, feeling dully that fate was all against him, while the man, with a satisfied smile on his face, swung himself up into the branches of the oak-tree, and after a careful survey of the Heath to see that there was no one in sight, let himself lightly on the path on the other side of the hedge, and walked quickly away.

All through dinner-time, and through the short winter afternoon that followed, Vivian waited in sickening anxiety for some one to come in with the news of the broken windows. He knew that they must soon be discovered, for the first person who walked round that way could not fail to notice them, and then he would be sure to be questioned, and he would need to tell lies to shield himself. Poor little boy! he was fast finding out how true the

saying is, that 'one lie needs six to cover it,' and the hot tears came into his eyes as he thought of last Sunday's talk with his mother, and of the many good resolutions he had made in church, ay, and which he had meant with all his heart to keep.

The discovery was not destined to be made that day, however. The summer-house stood right away from the stables and greenhouses, so that none of the men needed to go near it; and as the frost gave way again, as it had done on so many other days during the week, and an afternoon of heavy rain succeeded the brilliant sunshine of the morning, Aunt Dora did not insist on the children going out for their usual run, but sent them up into the schoolroom, where they spent the afternoon quietly with Sunday puzzles and story-books, so as not to disturb Isobel, who was still much more inclined to sleep than to talk.

CHAPTER X.

BURGLARS.

NEXT morning Vivian awoke to find Ronald standing on a chair peering through a crevice of the blind. The remembrance of yesterday's disaster flashed into his mind, and he was wide awake at once.

'Whatever are you doing?' he asked querulously. 'It's gray-dark, so you can't see anything.'

'I can't think what in the world is the matter,' answered Ronald in an excited whisper. 'I've been awake since five—I heard it strike on the hall clock; and I think every one else in the house has been awake too. They have been opening and shutting doors, and talking in the hall, and some one went right out of the house and down to the lodge. I think it must have been Uncle Walter, for I heard footsteps on the gravel, and it was his cough, and after a while he came back with some one, for I heard them talking. They came upstairs, for I heard Aunt Dora's voice, and now they are

outside again. Somehow, I fancy it is a policeman; I can just see the top of his helmet. He is walking up and down the gravel.'

A policeman! Vivian turned cold with terror. He had dreamt of discovery and punishment, but he had never dreamt of anything as bad as this. Surely Uncle Walter would never be so cruel as to send him to jail, even although he had broken two windows and taken a toy pistol.

But the pistol was stolen, and Uncle Walter could be very strict. The thought made him desperate, and he sat up in silence, and began to grope about for his clothes. If he could only dress quickly, he thought, before it grew quite light, he might slip unnoticed down the back stairs and run away. Where he could run to could be settled later. Vague ideas of getting to the docks crossed his mind; he knew that there were docks somewhere in London, and if he once reached them he might get on board one of the boats as cabin-boy or something, and sail to America or Australia. At present his one mad wish was to escape from the policeman and from the discovery which was sure to come—nay, which had come already.

'There are two of them,' whispered Ronald excitedly, 'and they seem to be looking for something among the bushes. I do wonder what has happened. Now they have gone round to the garden, and there is Uncle Walter standing on the doorstep talking to a gentleman in ordinary clothes. I can see him, for the gas in the hall is lit.'

Receiving no answer, he turned round, wondering if his brother had gone to sleep again.

'Whatever are you doing?' he asked in astonishment, for it was just light enough for him to see his brother sitting on the edge of the bed drawing on his stockings.

'I'm going to get up,' said Vivian slowly, 'to see what's the matter.'

His voice sounded harsh and broken, partly through terror, partly from his cold, which was decidedly worse.

'You're going to do nothing of the sort,' said Ronald. 'Aunt Dora said last night that you were to stay in bed to breakfast, if your cold was not quite better, and you are croaking like a raven. Look out, I'm coming back to bed, or I'll catch cold too; I have stood here until I feel like a block of ice.' With a flying leap he

was back among the blankets. 'Isn't it lovely to come back to bed on a cold morning?' he said, laughing. 'I can understand what Dorothy meant when she said to mother that "the comfiest bit of bed is when one has to get up;" and then he rolled over, and settled himself for a nap before Anne came to pull up the blinds and bring in the hot water.

Poor Vivian had been obliged to lie down again too, but all his chances of sleep had been banished effectually; and as he lay, with wide-open eyes, watching the light in the room grow clearer and clearer, and listening to the unusual sounds which were still going on outside the room, he wondered what would have happened and where he would be by the time the darkness came again. Seven o'clock struck on the cuckoo clock in the hall, and a quarter past, and then the half-hour, and at last Anne came in without knocking, and pulled up the blinds, but she had on an old dirty apron, and no cap, and was so unlike her usual trim self that Ronald could not help asking, 'Is there anything wrong, Anne? We have been hearing such a lot of talking all morning. Every one seemed to be up long before it was daylight.'

'There's plenty wrong, Master Ronald,' was Anne's somewhat grim answer. 'The house has been broken into, and every morsel of silver taken, not to mention the master's watch and a lot of the mistress's jewellery. How the scoundrels have done it dear only knows, for they must have been in nearly every room in the house, and they have forced open the very safe itself, which stands in the master's dressing-room. 'Tis a wonder we were not all murdered in our beds, for they seem to have been carrying firearms. And as if all that wasn't enough, here is little Miss Isobel taken ill, and Doctor Robson shaking his head over her quite serious-like. So get up as quiet as you can, like good boys, and give no more trouble to any one than you can help.'

The boys needed no second bidding to get up. The news which Anne had brought was too exciting for them to linger a moment longer in bed. Vivian's cold and his aunt's injunction about it were alike forgotten, and indeed, as the little boy hurried into his clothes, he began to feel much better, for a weight of anxiety was lifted from his mind. Always quick to note the probable consequences of things, he

saw at once that this unexpected development would divert suspicion from himself, even when the broken windows in the summer-house were discovered. Who was to know that the damage had not been done by the burglars for some reason of their own? The police were much more likely to suspect them than some one who was living in the house.

When the boys arrived downstairs, after a somewhat hasty toilet, they found everything in a state of dire confusion. Breakfast was laid in the servants' hall, but no one seemed to have time to attend to it.

Little Claude, with a tearful, scared face, was standing holding Mary's hand at the foot of the stairs, silently watching two policemen who were down on their knees on the parquetry floor, carefully examining some marks which had been made on the polished surface. It was plain that some one had walked across it with heavy boots on. In the opposite corner stood Mr Osbourne, his face stern and grave; and Anne, who had now got into a clean cap and apron, and was giving a concise account of how she had locked up the house on the previous evening to a tall man in a plain

blue uniform, evidently a police inspector, who was taking down her story in a note-book. Aunt Dora was nowhere to be seen. The dining-room door was open, and they could see how the drawers in the sideboard and plate-cupboard had been forced, and their contents rifled, and most of them carried away.

Vivian would have gone into the room, but Mary pulled him back.

'No one has to go in there, Master Vivian,' she whispered; 'it has to be left as it is until some very clever man, a detective from Scotland Yard, comes. They have telegraphed for him, and they expect him every minute. Till he comes, none of us has to go out or even up to our bedrooms.'

Mary spoke with a sort of gasp, and her rosy face was whiter than usual. She was an honest country girl, brought up in a quiet Suffolk village, and this was her first experience of service in London; and although her conscience was quite clear, and she could prove where she had been, and what she had done every minute of yesterday afternoon, she dreaded the interview, which she knew must come, with the detective, 'who,' Anne had informed her, 'would

begin by suspecting them all, and looking in all their boxes before he made up his mind that it had been none of them who had done it.'

Yesterday had been her Sunday out, so she felt that she would have even more questions to answer than the rest of her fellow-servants, and she kept saying over and over again to herself that she could tell him quite easily where she had been. She had gone to church in the morning, and then she had spent the rest of the day with a cousin who lived at Cricklewood, and her cousin's husband, a respectable joiner, had seen her home at nine o'clock.

Presently Ralph came running in, looking flushed and important. He had been downstairs early, and had just been out for a tour of inspection on his own account.

'I say, father,' he cried, 'do you know what I have discovered? The fellows have smashed two of the summer-house windows. The glass is lying all over the path.'

In his haste he had forgotten to wipe his shoes, and a muddy mark on the polished floor, which completely hid a tiny scratch, made one of the policemen glance up at his superior

officer with a look of annoyance. Ralph had taxed their patience severely already, for he had been following closely at their heels for the last half-hour, pouring out remarks and suggestions in his own superior, self-confident way, quite regardless of their civil hints that they could get on better with their work if he left them to find out things for themselves.

The inspector noticed the glance at once. There was very little that his sharp eyes did not notice.

'I think, sir,' he said, turning to Mr Osbourne, 'we would get on quicker without the children. The fewer people who are about at this sort of thing the better.'

'Yes, to be sure,' replied Mr Osbourne, who had not noticed that there were any of them downstairs until Ralph's noisy interruption.—'Go and have your breakfast at once, boys.—Mary, will you go with them and see to it? We will call you if we want you. And afterwards, see that they all go up to the playroom, or somewhere where they will be out of the way.'

'But, father,' began Ralph lingering behind the others, not choosing to consider himself

included in an order to the children, 'do you hear what I am saying? I found out that the summer-house windows are broken, and surely that is a clue.'

'Hold your tongue, Ralph, and do as you are bid,' said his father sharply. 'We found all that out long before you were up; so go along and have your breakfast with the others, and don't let me find you bothering about down here again.'

Ralph, who was afraid of his father, dared not argue the point further, but he went out of the hall with a frown on his face. He had a great idea of his own importance, and he did not care to be snubbed in this way before the servants, and told to stay out of the way as if he were six years old. There was no help for it, however, so he followed the others to the servants' hall with the best grace he could, and found that Mary had already poured out the tea and was good-naturedly answering the many questions which Ronald and Vivian were showering upon her.

''Tis clear that the thieves got in by the conservatory, Master Vivian,' she was saying as Ralph entered and sat down sullenly in the

place which had been left vacant for him, 'for they have cut a great circle clean out of the glass just behind the stables; and then I suppose one of them put in his hand and unlocked the door, for Hunter found it open this morning, and he locked it himself last night. They seem to have carried out the silver that way too, and a nice lot of it they have got, more's the pity, for Mason picked up one of the best silver forks just a stone's-throw down the drive. None of us maids have been allowed to go out; but we heard the policeman say as how a cart must have waited on the road just outside the gate—the wheel-marks can be seen quite plainly—and they must have put it all into that, and carted it away. Like as not it is all melted down by this time. I've heard people say that these thieves are such sharp ones they melt all their things at once.'

'What for?' asked Claude, pausing with his mug of milk half-way to his mouth. 'It would spoil all the things if they were melted.'

'Not to let people know whose things they were,' explained Ronald with a smile, taking up a teaspoon. 'You see, Claude, here is W. O. on the end of this, or ought to be, though I

can't see it. Well, if the police found a teaspoon with W. O. on it in any one's house—any one whom he thought was likely to steal, I mean—he would know that the teaspoons were Uncle Walter's, and that the people in the house had stolen them.'

'You won't find any letters on the end of any of these teaspoons, worse luck! Master Ronald,' said Mary. 'These are the kitchen spoons, the only ones that are left. The rogues knew what to take and what to leave, and they did not touch any of the kitchen things.'

'Where's my christening-mug?' asked Claude suddenly, noticing for the first time that he was using a plain white china cup instead of the solid silver mug which his godfather, a rich old gentleman in India, had given him.

'Melted,' said Ralph maliciously, while Mary murmured, 'I'm afraid it has gone with the rest of the things, Master Claude. You know it always stood on the sideboard in the dining-room, along with the really good silver.'

'But my name was on it,' said Claude, the tears rising in his round blue eyes at the thought of losing his mug, which he had had all his life, and of which he was very proud.

'My whole name is on it, "Claude Alexander Osbourne," and my date.'

'All the more reason why they should melt it,' went on Ralph, who was in the mood to tease his little brother, and with whom the Indian mug had always been rather a sore subject. He was the eldest, and he had always felt that the mug, and the rich godfather too, should have belonged to him, instead of to Claude; for his godfathers, two old clergymen, had only given him a Bible and a prayer-book, which in his mind were very mean gifts compared to Isobel's case containing a silver knife and fork and spoon, which she had got at her christening, and Claude's silver mug.

'Hush, Master Claude,' said Mary, as she saw the big tears begin to roll down the little boy's face at his brother's unkind words; 'don't vex your heart about the mug. They say that the man from Scotland Yard can find out anything, and he will be sure to catch the thieves long before they have had time to melt all the things. And your mug was so solid it would take a long time to melt.

'As for you, Master Ralph,' she went on, 'if I were a big boy like you I would be ashamed

to tease a little one and make him cry, when there is so much trouble and worry in the house. Dear, dear! there, you have set him off, and you know how long it will be before he stops; and what will your father say, with Miss Isobel so ill?'

'How is Isobel?' asked Ronald, suddenly remembering what Anne had said when she called him, and noticing almost for the first time that neither she nor Aunt Dora had ever appeared.

'She isn't at all well,' said Mary gravely. 'The mistress has been up since five o'clock with her. 'Twas then the robbery was found out. Mistress went down into the dining-room to get some soda-water—Miss Isobel was sick—and she found it all in an upturn.—Oh, do be quiet, Master Claude,' she added in a worried tone. 'The doctor said that Miss Isobel was to be kept quiet, and here you are roaring like a bull of Bashan.—It's all your fault, that's what it is, Master Ralph. And, oh dear, there's the master calling!'

Just then Uncle Walter's voice sounded sharply from the hall.

'Who is that making such a noise?' he asked.

'Be quiet, Claude, at once, do you hear?—Mary, surely you can keep him quiet. We cannot have a noise like that in the house to-day.'

But the sharp note in his father's voice only made matters worse, and in spite of Mary's threats and promises and offers of sundry lumps of toffee which she would get out of her box when the policemen would let her go upstairs, if he would only be quiet, Claude went on crying till he bade fair to go into one of the screaming-fits for which he had been noted as a baby, but which he seemed quite to have outgrown.

As a matter of fact, the confusion and mystery which had suddenly overtaken his usually orderly home had quite upset the little fellow's nerves, and it needed very little to make him lose his self-control. Poor Mary was in despair; but Ronald, who had a wonderful way with children, came to the rescue. His own little sister Dorothy was a very excitable child, and Mrs Armitage often said that she did not know what she would have done without her eldest son, who could soothe and quiet the little girl when every one else was helpless.

'Come on, Claude,' he said cheerily, pushing

back his chair, 'I've finished breakfast now, and we will go out and see Monarch. We will take these bits of sausage, and perhaps Mrs Mason will allow us to give them to him to-day. I shouldn't wonder if his breakfast had been forgotten when every one has been so busy.'

'Oh, Master Ronald, haven't you heard?' began Mary, 'poor Monarch'—— and then she stopped, for Claude ceased crying for a minute to listen to what she had to say about his pet. It had suddenly occurred to her that the news she had to tell would not help to comfort the little boy.

'I think you had better not go into the courtyard,' she went on hurriedly, with a warning look at Ronald, 'not just now, at least, for the hole they cut in the conservatory is just above Monarch's kennel. You know how the conservatory comes quite close to the courtyard near there, and the inspector didn't seem to want any one about. He says that if there are any footsteps they will be all trodden away if any one goes to look.'

'All right,' said sensible Ronald, who saw clearly that there was some other reason which

Mary did not wish to give. 'We'll go into the greenhouse instead, and see if we can catch any little green frogs among the ferns by the tank.'

This was a favourite occupation of Isobel's and Claude's, though it was not very often allowed; but to-day Ronald thought that he could take the responsibility upon himself, and Mary heartily seconded his proposal. So Claude went off quietly with his big cousin to get his boots and gaiters, while the two other boys only waited till the door was shut behind them to fall on Mary with eager questions.

'Why did I not want him to go into the courtyard, Master Ralph? Because the poor beast that he is so fond of is stone dead, murdered by those scoundrels so that he couldn't bark and they might begin their work in peace. If Monarch had been alive I warrant they wouldn't have cut their hole so easily; he would have roused the whole of Hampstead first.'

'Monarch dead!' said both the boys at once. Ralph felt a lump rise in his throat at the news, for the gentle animal had been a favourite with all the children, while Vivian

sat and gazed vaguely out of the window, a great fear rising in his heart.

'How did they kill him?' asked Ralph at last, and his voice was rather husky.

'They poisoned him,' said Mary, beginning to put the plates together with great energy. 'Mason found half of a bit of nasty yellow pastry lying in his kennel; he had eaten the rest. It had been made with some poisonous stuff, the policeman said, and the poor brute was stone dead, and quite stiff when they found him. But, anyway, he did not suffer, for a mercy, for he was curled up quite peaceful like, just as if he had gone to sleep.—But, bless me, Master Vivian, what's the matter with you next?' she exclaimed in alarm, for Vivian, who had risen suddenly to his feet, turned perfectly white, and, after one or two feeble attempts to steady himself by holding on to the back of a chair, fell forward on the floor in a dead faint.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DOCTOR'S VISIT.

WHEN Vivian came to himself he was lying flat on his back on his bed upstairs, and some one was bathing his head with cold water, while Mary stood by the side of the bed holding a basin.

'He is better now, mum,' he heard her say; 'he has opened his eyes, and the colour is coming back into his face.'

'Poor little fellow!' It was Aunt Dora who spoke. 'I would not have thought that he was so easily upset. He must have been feeling ill all morning. I told him to stay in bed for his cold; but I suppose every one forgot to see after him, and he just got up like the others.'

'I don't think it was exactly that, mum,' answered Mary; 'for he ate a good breakfast, and seemed all right till some one began to talk about Monarch; and I think it was the shock when he heard that the poor brute had been poisoned that did it.'

At her words the whole hideous story, and

the share he had unwittingly taken in it, flashed across Vivian's mind. 'Oh Aunt Dora!' he cried, 'I did not do it. I did not know that it would hurt him.'

Had his aunt been able to understand his words he would have confessed everything there and then, he felt so weak and miserable and broken-down; but she only looked at Mary in perplexity.

'Do what?' she asked in a puzzled way. 'What is he thinking of, I wonder?'

'About killing Monarch, I should say, mum,' said Mary. 'Mrs Mason said to me that he had been feeding the dog with some scraps while you were all at church; but of course that had nothing to do with the nasty bits of cake that poisoned him.—They must have been given to him at night, after it was dark, Master Vivian, when every one was safe in the house, and there was no one to see what was going on.'

'Yes; it could not possibly be anything that you gave the poor dog that did him harm, dearie,' said Aunt Dora, kissing him and laying a soft handkerchief steeped in eau de Cologne on his brow. 'They found a piece of strange-

looking cake in his kennel which had evidently been put there by some strangers, and we expect there was poison in it. The police inspector is going to take it to a chemist and have it analysed. So don't think about it any more, but lie still and try to have a little sleep, for I must go back to Isobel, and I hear your uncle calling for Mary downstairs.'

Mary gave a little gasp. She knew that the summons meant that she must go down and be questioned as to her movements yesterday, by the detective who had arrived just as she was carrying Vivian to his room. She had heard that in London the policemen and lawyers were so clever that they asked questions until they made people say the exact opposite to what they meant, and the prospect was very alarming to her simple country mind.

Her mistress saw her anxiety, and reassured her kindly.

'Just tell the plain truth, Mary; tell him where you were, and what you did all yesterday; and remember no one here suspects you, but detectives always like to question every one in the house before they do anything else.'

Then they went outside, closing the door behind them, and Vivian was left to his own thoughts.

He saw the whole thing clearly now. The man with the green patch over his eye had evidently been prowling about, spying how the land lay, and seeing how he could best reach Monarch's kennel and give the poor dog the poisonous cakes. When Vivian appeared he had hidden himself in the summer-house, in the hope of not being seen; and, while he was there, Vivian's own foolishness in taking out the pistol and firing the fatal shot that shattered the windows had put him completely in his power; and the threats of exposure, and the cleverly contrived cock-and-bull story, which the little boy had believed implicitly, about the lame daughter at home and her fondness for puppies, had insured the cakes being given at the right moment.

He ground his teeth as he realised how completely he had been duped and made a fool of, and for a moment he almost wished that the detective downstairs would begin to question him, and draw out the whole story. But he knew that there was little chance of

that. If the confession came, it must come from himself alone; and he turned his face on the pillow with a sob as he thought what a web of deceit, and lies, and wrongdoing he had woven round himself, for to confess to having seen the man, and to having slipped out in the darkness and given Monarch the cakes, would lead to awkward questions about the broken window, and to confess to having broken that would lead to the whole story of the pistol and its concealment.

No, he had not courage to face it all; he must go on living with the weight of these black sins on his conscience; and as he tossed restlessly up and down he wondered to himself if this was the way in which thieves and other wicked people began their lives of crime, and if he would go on getting worse and worse, until at last he became quite a wicked man who did not care what he did, and in due time would break his mother's heart.

Presently Ronald came into the room, looking grave and anxious.

'Why, Vivi, boy, what came over you?' he asked, sitting down on the bed and putting his arm round his brother. 'They tell me that

you turned quite funny when you heard about Monarch, and Aunt Dora says that she can't understand what put it into your head that you had hurt him. You only gave him some scraps of bread, didn't you?'

There was something in Ronald's voice as he asked this question which seemed to irritate his brother—a vague trace of anxiety, as if he would like to hear from Vivian's own lips that this was all that he had had to do with the dog—for Vivian pushed away his arm roughly.

'Of course it was all I gave him,' he answered pettishly, 'and I never thought they would do him any harm. I was confused and funny when I said that to Aunt Dora. Do go away, Ronald, my head aches so, and auntie said I was to be quiet.'

Ronald was silent for a moment, but there was a worried look on his face. There had been one or two things in his brother's conduct that had puzzled him during the last few days, and he could not help remembering how he had noticed, the evening before, that Vivian's house-shoes looked muddy, as if he had been outside with them, but clearly he

was not in the mood for further questioning, so when he spoke again he wisely chose another subject.

'Do you know, I think that Isobel is awfully ill, worse than we think,' he said. 'I haven't seen Aunt Dora at all; but I asked Anne, and she told me that Isobel woke auntie up quite early this morning by beginning to scream, and when auntie went into her room she didn't know her in the least. They got the doctor at once, and he gave her some stuff that made her quieter, but she has never been properly awake, and he is coming back at ten o'clock. I'm wondering,' he went on slowly, 'if we shouldn't tell Aunt Dora about that fall she had on Wednesday? I've heard of people hurting their heads when they fell like that.'

In a moment all Vivian's fears of discovery were reawakened, and all his dreams of confession had vanished. If Isobel's fall were spoken of, the oak-tree behind the summer-house might come to be examined, and the hole and its hidden contents would be almost sure to be discovered.

'Oh Ronald, don't be a fool!' he said sharply, sitting up in bed in his excitement; 'that can't

have anything to do with Isobel's illness. She has been as well as possible since then, and it is no use bothering Aunt Dora about it now. You 're nothing but an old woman, always going and imagining things.'

Ronald's face flushed at the taunt. Always conscientious, and almost morbidly afraid of telling an untruth, he was apt to be called 'womanish' and 'silly' by the Strangeways, who could not understand a boy who preferred to be laughed at or punished rather than get out of a scrape by shuffling or making an excuse. Their teasing had little effect on him; but when the taunt came from his own sharp little brother's lips, whom he admired with an unselfish admiration which few elder boys would have accorded to a younger one, it hurt him deeply, but he stuck to his point.

'I don't care,' he said. 'I may either be an old woman or not; but I once heard father say that injuries to people's heads don't always show at first, that's why doctors often don't know what is the matter with people. So I think that Aunt Dora ought to know, and I'm going to tell her.'

'Aunt Dora ought to know what?' asked a

voice, and Mrs Osbourne entered the room. 'I hoped to find this boy asleep,' she said, laying her hand on Vivian's hot cheek, and here he is chattering away as fast as he can. What are you discussing, and what is it that you think I ought to know?'

'It is about Isobel, Aunt Dora,' said Ronald bravely. 'Did you know that she had had a fall?'

'A fall? When? here? Tell me quickly, Ronald.' His aunt's voice sounded so sharp and strained that even Ronald was frightened, and Vivian hid his face in the clothes and wondered what was going to happen next.

'It was last Wednesday. We were playing hide-and-seek, and Vivi and Isobel climbed up on one of the branches of the old oak-tree behind the summer-house, and when Claude and I caught sight of them they began to crawl along the branch, and all at once it broke, and they both fell on to the path.'

'And why was I not told this before?' asked Aunt Dora in grave displeasure. 'The others were younger; but I thought you were to be trusted, Ronald.'

The tears came into Ronald's eyes, but he

made no attempt to justify himself; that would have been to have blamed Ralph.

'Isobel said she was not hurt, Aunt Dora,' he said simply; 'and though she looked a little bit white at first, she seemed all right in a moment.'

'That did not matter. You should not have listened to her; you should have come straight to me.' The words were spoken so passionately that Ronald was dumb; but Vivian spoke out loyally:.

'It wasn't Ronald's fault, auntie, whosever fault it was. He ran into the house to tell you, even although Isobel begged him not to, and Ralph laughed at him for making a fuss. But you were not in; you had gone to see that old lady, and you did not come back till tea-time, and then Isobel seemed all right, and we never thought any more about it till just now.'

Mrs Osbourne laid her hand quickly on her elder nephew's shoulder. 'Forgive me, my boy,' she said; 'but I am so anxious I hardly know what I am saying, and this only confirms what the doctor feared. He asked me if she had not had a fall, and of course I did not know. He is coming back at ten—there is his

ring—and he talked—he talked—of her head and her back.'

The last words were spoken so low that they were scarcely audible; but as Mrs Osbourne hastily rose and left the room they heard her murmur to herself, 'My little girl, my only little girl!' and they gazed at one another in awe-struck silence.

'Aunt Dora was crying,' said Vivian at last. 'She can't think that Isobel is going to die, can she? Oh Ronald!' he repeated, taking hold of his brother's arm, and shaking it, as if to force an answer from him, 'do say something; do say that she isn't going to die.'

'Oh, I hope it isn't as bad as that,' said Ronald, trying to speak cheerfully. 'Lots of people get their heads hurt, and come all right afterwards; but, all the same, I wish we had told at the time. She might not have been so bad now.'

In a very few minutes the door opened again, and Aunt Dora came back, accompanied by an elderly gentleman, who glanced sharply at the two boys. Aunt Dora seemed quite herself again, although her voice trembled slightly.

'This is Dr Robson, Vivian,' she said, 'and I

want him just to see you for a moment, to make sure that you are all right after your faint turn in the morning; and then I want you both to try and remember exactly what happened on Wednesday, when the branch broke, and Isobel fell.'

The doctor felt Vivian's pulse, and asked him a few questions. 'He's all right,' he said, nodding briskly to Mrs Osbourne. 'His nerves have got the better of him with the excitement of the robbery and all the turn-up in the house. Send him out for a good walk on the Heath; it will do his cold no harm, and he will come in looking like a different boy.

'And now, my lad,' he went on, turning to Ronald, 'I want you to tell me exactly what happened last Wednesday, and how far little Miss Isobel fell, and what she looked like when she got up.'

'I will tell you what I can, sir,' replied Ronald; 'but Vivian knows better than I do, for he was with her on the branch, and when she fell, he fell along with her. It took me a few minutes to get round to them, for of course they fell over on to the Heath, and I ran round by the lodge. Isobel was sitting on

the branch then, and she said she was not hurt, but her face was so white I thought that she had broken her arm or something, and there was a queer look in her eyes as if she wasn't seeing anything. I was frightened, and I ran in to see if I couldn't find Aunt Dora; but she had gone out, and Isobel walked home herself, so I thought it was all right.'

The doctor listened to his story attentively, nodding his head once or twice when Ronald spoke of the curious look he had noticed in his little cousin's eyes. Then he turned to Vivian.

'When the branch broke, who was underneath?' he asked; but Vivian could not answer this question.

'I think we both fell together,' he said; 'only Isobel fell on her back and I fell on my face. I remember that because my hands were skinned, and she said she thought she had bumped the back of her head.'

'Ah,' said the doctor quickly, 'did she say that at once?'

'No,' said Vivian; 'at first she lay quite still, with her eyes half-open, and then she

got up and said she wasn't hurt, and then she got awfully white and sat down again, and said that about her head; then Ronald came, and we all went home.'

'Did you run home?'

'No, we didn't. Claude and I wanted to run, but Isobel said she couldn't, for her legs felt as if she were going to take pins and needles, and she had jumpy pains up her back.'

'Thank you,' said the doctor, rising. 'You have told your story very clearly.' Then he glanced at Aunt Dora and said gravely, 'I am afraid that this explains a great deal.'

CHAPTER XII.

THE DARK SHADOW.

THE doctor's prophecy proved true, for after a game of hockey on the Heath with Ralph and Ronald and one or two other lads whom they met, and whom Ralph knew, Vivian felt like a different boy. Indeed, all three boys felt better for the game, and more disposed to look on the bright side of things, and they were returning home for dinner in fairly good spirits when Ralph stopped short with a sudden exclamation.

'Hallo! What on earth is up now?' he said. 'There's a policeman walking off with our Joe. Surely they don't think that it was he who stole the silver?'

They all stopped and gazed with wondering eyes in the direction in which Ralph was pointing. Sure enough, just leaving the lodge gates was one of the stalwart policemen who had been about the house all morning, and the lad whose arm he was holding with a not very friendly grasp was certainly Joe Flinders

the lad who had worked under Hunter the gardener for more than a year, and who was a great favourite with the children. He was the only son of a widowed mother, and a nice, civil, obliging boy, with a cheery word for every one, and endless patience with little Claude, who would follow him for hours at a time with a wheelbarrow and spade which his father had bought for him.

As a rule, Joe was always whistling, and walked about with a certain self-satisfied swagger, with his cap on the back of his head; for was he not earning good wages, and did he not bid fair to become as good a gardener as Mr Hunter?

But to-day things were very different. He dragged his feet along with a hopeless slouch, and his cap was pulled right over his eyes, as if to hide his face from the passers-by.

With one accord the boys raced after them, and overtook the strangely mated couple just as they turned the corner at the grocer's shop and turned up the path which led over the Heath to the police station.

'What's the matter, Joe?' asked Ralph, who had been fairly startled out of his indifference

by the events of the day, looking pityingly at Joe's swollen and tear-stained eyes, for the big lad was crying like a baby.

'They say that I had sommat to do with the robbery, Master Ralph,' he sobbed, 'because when master sent Mr Hunter to cut down the branches where Miss Isobel fell, in case some one else climbed up the tree and hurt themselves, he found a hole in one of the branches, and a pistol in it, which it seems had been lost, and it was wrapped up in one of my old caps, the one I spoilt with the white paint when I was a-painting the fence round the far paddock. I threw away the cap, and never thought about it again; but 'tis mine sure enough, though 'ow it came to be in the 'ole I don't know no more than an infant. And now my situation and my character is gone, and who is to tell mother—she that trained me up always to be honest?'

Here poor Joe fairly broke down, and Ralph said indignantly, in his most grown-up way, 'I don't believe a word of it, policeman; there must be some mistake.'

'Don't you indeed, young sir?' said the giant policeman, smiling contemptuously. 'If you had

lived as long as me you wouldn't be so quick to say you didn't believe things. Besides, I'm only taking him up on suspicion, so he needn't be in such a taking. If he can prove that he is innocent, let him prove it. But it appears that this pistol must have been stolen out of the house, and it's found hidden in a hole in a tree, wrapped in a cap which 'e owns is 'is, and to my mind it's as plain that he stole it as that two and two make four, though as to connecting it with the robbery, well, that's a different matter.'

'It's all the same,' sobbed Joe, 'whether I'm taken up on suspicion or whether they are sure of it. My character's gone, for who will take a lad in who has been took up by the police? And who will look after my mother, for she is so bad with the rhumatiz that she can't do anything for herself?'

'Come, come,' said the policeman, stepping forward a little quicker, for already a small crowd of children was gathering, and he did not want a scene. 'Hold your tongue, and come along.—As for you, young gentlemen, I would advise you to go home. What he says may be true enough. He may know nothing about it,

but that remains to be proved; and often the most innocent-looking ones are the most artful.'

'It's a blooming shame, Joe,' repeated Ralph.

Ronald took the lad's hand kindly in his own. 'I believe what you say, Joe, and if you tell the truth it will all come right,' he said.

But Vivian stood silent, utterly tongue-tied. It was true that he had not been found out; but already his punishment was heavy, for it was almost more than he could bear to have to stand by and see an innocent lad led off to prison for his fault.

'What a nice finish up to the holidays!' said Ralph as they walked slowly homewards. 'The house broken into, and every one as cross as two sticks, and Isobel ill, and now Joe taken up. It is enough to give a fellow the blues. It is a good thing that there is Mrs Seton-Kinaird's party to look forward to.'

'Do you think that we will go,' said Ronald gravely, 'now that Isobel is so ill? I was just wondering if I oughtn't to write and tell mother that we are going home. I'm sure Aunt Dora would be glad to have fewer of us in the house.'

'Oh, don't do that till after the party,' said Ralph, who did not like the idea of being left alone with only little Claude for company. 'You are going home on Wednesday anyhow, and I expect Isobel will be a lot better to-morrow. It isn't as if it were anything infectious.'

But when they reached the house they were met by news that put all thoughts of the party out of their minds. The door was opened by Mary, and her eyes were as red and swollen as Joe's had been, but from a very different cause.

'You have to go up the back stairs,' she said in a husky whisper, 'and be as quiet as you possibly can. Poor little Miss Isobel is dreadfully ill, and they say that it all depends upon her being kept quiet; and she does get so excited at the least little bit of a sound.'

'Have they sent for Dr Robson again?' asked Ralph, for they could hear the doctor's voice as he stood talking to Mr Osbourne in the corridor just outside Isobel's room.

'Yes,' said Mary with a sob; 'the poor lamb took much worse just after he had gone; she got so excited, and talked so fast, we could hear

her all over the house. She would have it that she was playing in the garden with you, Master Vivian, and with little Master Claude, and Master Claude heard her, and began to cry, and that made her worse, so Anne put on his coat and has taken him over to Mrs Anstey's. He will be quite happy there playing with the other children, and I am to go and sleep with him at night.'

'And has Dr Robson been here all this time?' asked the boys, awed and startled by the thought that Isobel *could* be ill enough to need such attention, and yet feeling somehow that it was all a bad dream, and that they would suddenly wake up and find her merry, mischievous face at their elbows.

'Yes, he has,' said Mary with a sigh; 'and they have sent for an hospital nurse and a big doctor from London, Sir Somebody Something—I forget his name. And they have telegraphed for your father, Master Ronald; I heard master order the carriage to go and meet him at Victoria; they expect him by the four o'clock train.'

Vivian waited to hear no more. Regardless of Mary's warning, 'You were to stay here in

the schoolroom, Master Vivian,' he rushed away as noiselessly as he could to his own room, feeling that he must be alone, and that he must have time to think. He was not crying—tears seemed far away; but he felt as if some terrible darkness were settling round him, a darkness with no light in it. He was a thief, Joe had been taken up, and now Isobel was dying. In after years Vivian looked back on that moment as the blackest and most desperate of his whole life.

'You'd better go after him, Master Ronald, and see where he has gone to,' whispered Mary, 'and I will stay here with Master Ralph. Only keep him quietly in his room, or else bring him back here, for you mustn't be waiting about the corridor. Master said you weren't to do that on any account. They have Miss Isobel's door and window open, and she hears the slightest sound, though she doesn't know anybody.'

'Mary, will she die?'

The question forced itself from Ronald's quivering lips in spite of himself, and in spite of a protesting groan from Ralph, who had flung himself face downwards on the hearth-

rug. He had never realised before how dear the unselfish little sister was to him; and now his conscience was speaking very plainly, and telling him that it was she who had always done things for him, and that he had taken very little trouble to try and give her pleasure.

'Girls are made to fag for their brothers' had been the cry of the boys at school, and he had thought it a fine thing to believe it, and to act upon it; but somehow everything looked different to-day.

'She is in God's hands, Master Ronald,' answered Mary unsteadily, 'and everything will be done for her that they can do, but'—— She did not finish the sentence, and her kind eyes filled with tears.

The same question which he had just asked Mary awaited Ronald when he reached his room, where Vivian sat huddled up on the deep window-seat, looking out at the bright sunshine with dull, unseeing eyes.

Ronald did not answer him. He could not; the whole thing seemed too terrible to be true, and yet in his heart he knew that Mary thought that his little cousin was dying. That

was why she was crying, and that was why they had telegraphed for his father.

He crossed the room in silence, and stood beside his brother, looking out like him at the golden sunlight, which was turning every frosted twig into a spray of diamonds, and wondering at the contrast between the brightness which lay over everything out of doors, and the shadow which was darkening and saddening the house.

But Vivian would not let him remain silent. 'Speak, Ronald, speak!' he cried, taking hold of Ronald's arm and shaking it in his excitement. 'She won't die; she mustn't. Why, she was at the Hippodrome the other night, and she was as well as any of us. She can't die yet; people don't die so quickly.'

Just then a sound reached their ears which made the words die away on Vivian's lips. It was the sound of a weak, quavering little voice calling out 'Vivian, Vivian! let us run and hide.' It was Isobel, poor child, thinking, in her delirium, that she was once more playing in the garden.

The boys knew her voice in a moment, but how sadly it was changed! Somehow the sound

of it calmed Vivian's excitement, and he laid his head against his brother's shoulder and began to sob in a dull, hopeless way.

God was beginning to punish him, he thought, not in the way he had expected by the discovery of his sin, but in a far more terrible way. First of all he had caused suspicion to fall on Joe, and Joe was going to be put in prison, and now He was taking Isobel away, and the punishment which should have fallen on him—Vivian—alone, was going to fall on Aunt Dora, and Uncle Walter, and Ralph, and little Claude.

'Suppose we say our prayers, Vivi,' said Ronald with a break in his voice. 'If Jesus could bring back Jairus' little daughter, He can make Isobel better; and it is the only thing we can do to help.'

'You can if you like,' said Vivian, hopeless; 'but it would be no good for me to do it. I'm not good enough.'

'No more am I,' said Ronald humbly; 'but mother says that it isn't our goodness or badness that matters; it is if we really mean what we say, and it is "for Jesus' sake," you know,' he added shyly, for neither of the boys were wont to talk much about religion.

Vivian made no answer, so Ronald knelt down and said some simple prayers for both of them—the prayers he had learned to say at his mother's knee when he was a little fellow, and which he had never changed: 'Our Father,' and then the Collect for protection from danger, and then he hesitated, and added a little broken prayer in his own words that Isobel might be made better, then came the Benediction.

The solemn words brought a curious feeling of strength and safety to Ronald, and he rose from his knees with fresh hope and trust. The same loving Master who had healed the little Galilean maiden so many hundreds of years ago was as near and as powerful to-day, only Vivian and he could not see Him, but they had told Him their trouble, and already to Ronald's boyish heart came the promise of relief.

But Vivian felt none of this. The words which had comforted Ronald only made him feel more miserable. How could he pray to 'be kept from sin, and from falling into any kind of danger,' or how could he expect God to hear him or to answer his prayer for Isobel's recovery when a burden of falsehood and theft

lay on his conscience, which he had not the courage to confess, and for which innocent people were suffering?

No, Ronald's prayer might be heeded, for Ronald was always true and loving and dutiful, even although he was a trifle slow at times; but there was no chance whatever of God hearing, or at least paying any attention to, the prayers of a liar and a thief.

Poor little miserable boy! he could not imagine that the mere fact that he had faced his sin, and called it by its right name, and had not tried to make excuses even to himself, was the first step towards that repentance and confession which at present seemed so impossible to him.

Presently Mary came quietly in to tell them that dinner was ready; and although they all protested that they could not eat anything, it is wonderful how a boy's appetite comes back at the sight of roast turkey and a rolly-polly pudding. Afterwards, however, when the table was cleared, and Mary had disappeared downstairs with the dishes, time hung heavily enough.

Ralph, as usual, took refuge from his troubles in a book; and Ronald, acting on a remark

which Mary had made, that if Dr Armitage returned home that night he would probably take the two boys with him, went back to his room to put his own clothes and his brother's in something like order, in case his father decided to do this. So Vivian was left to his own thoughts, and very sad and sorrowful ones they were.

The long afternoon wore slowly away. Now and then a door opened or shut, but the watchers by Isobel's bed were far too anxious to spare a thought for the three lonely boys in the schoolroom. At half-past three Mason wheeled the carriage out, and began to get it ready for the station. Vivian could see him from the schoolroom window; could see, too, Monarch's empty kennel, and the great round hole in the glass of the conservatory which the burglars had cut last night. The sight sent his thoughts back to the summer-house and the man with the green patch over his eye. Could it have been only yesterday morning he had spoken to him? What a long, long time ago it seemed! Even the burglary seemed an old story, something that happened long ago, before the awful news had been told to him

that Isobel was dying, that God was going to take her away as a punishment for his wickedness. Poor little mistaken lad, how the Great Father must have pitied him as He looked down and saw the image of Himself which Vivian was forming in his heart, an image so different from the Perfect Love which the Christ had come to earth to declare.

At last the carriage rolled out of the yard, and everything was quiet again, and presently Ronald came back and joined him at the window.

'I have packed everything except our brushes and combs and our sleeping suits,' he said. 'They can be put in in a moment if father wants us to go home; but somehow I fancy he will wait till to-morrow to hear what the big doctor says. He can't come till late this evening. He has had to go into the country. Anne told me so; I met her on the stairs.

'Just look at poor Monarch's kennel,' he went on. 'It is a good thing that Isobel doesn't know that he is dead; it might vex her. I heard her calling out to him as I passed her door just now. I expect she thinks that she is playing with him.'

'And he is dead and buried,' said Vivian, and then he shivered. That was his doing, as well as the rest.

Ronald looked at him anxiously. 'Come nearer the fire,' he said. 'You have stood there until you are cold, and it is dreary looking out now that the sun is gone. I wish Mary or some one would come and light the gas.'

It was five o'clock, and they were having tea when the carriage came back. The table looked just as it had done at the same time a week before, for Mary, anxious to make things as cheerful as possible, had been generous with cakes and jam.

'It is just a week ago to-night since you came,' said Ralph, as the wheels stopped, and a subdued bustle was heard in the hall, then he stopped abruptly as the contrast between that night and this struck him, and for a moment nobody spoke except Mary, who suddenly woke up to the fact that it was time that somebody was asking for more tea.

Dr Armitage must have gone right upstairs with Uncle Walter, for no one came near the schoolroom for nearly half-an-hour, and when

the door opened at last it was not he who came softly in, but his wife; and at the sight of her dear sweet face her two boys realised all at once how long it was—a whole week—since they had seen her, and wondered how they could have stayed away from her so long.

'Oh mother!' cried Ronald, jumping up in surprise and pulling her down beside him on his seat; and then for a moment he could say no more, but could only squeeze her hand; while Vivian, much to every one's astonishment, turned his face away from the table and burst into a torrent of loud, frightened sobs.

'Hush, Vivian!' said his father, who had come into the room unnoticed along with Mr Osbourne. 'You must control yourself, my boy; we cannot have a noise like that here.'

But his mother had stretched out her hand and drawn him gently to her.

'Take Jack down to the study and have your tea there, Walter,' she said; 'Anne will see after you, and we will stay up here a little by ourselves. We can have a quarter of an hour's talk; and I will have the boys quite ready by half-past six.

'Now we will be cosy,' she said, drawing

up a low chair to the fire, and sitting down on it. 'You too, Ralph; here is room for you on the floor at this side. Vivi can sit on my knee if he doesn't think he is too big.'

Vivian, however, who was still sobbing, preferred to sit on the floor, and to hide his hot face in his mother's dress, and she wisely took no notice, knowing that he would recover himself more quickly if she left him alone. 'What a long, weary, troubled day you must have had!' she said softly; 'but Aunt Dora has told me how good you have been, and how little trouble you have given.'

'How did you manage to leave Dorothy, mother?' asked Ronald, instinctively keeping clear of the subject which was uppermost in all their minds.

'Nicely,' answered his mother with a smile. 'I promised her that, if she would be a very good girl, father would bring her her Ronnie back,' and she looked down at her eldest son with a little smile, 'and Vivi too,' she added, putting her hand tenderly on the little black head which was half-hidden in the folds of her soft gray gown. 'She has missed you both so terribly that she was willing to promise

anything so long as she had the prospect of getting you back. I am sure I don't know what she will do when you go to school.'

'Then we are going home with father,' said Ronald. 'Mary thought we might, so I have packed nearly all our things.'

'That was my good, thoughtful boy,' said his mother. 'I asked Anne to see to your things; but she is so busy I am glad there will not be much for her to do.'

'Are you going to stay here then?' asked Vivian, speaking for the first time.

'Yes, sonnie, for a day or two, to help auntie to nurse Isobel. So Ronald and you must do the best you can at home, and look after father and little Dorothy.'

The tears came into Mrs Armitage's eyes as she thought how very little more nursing her little niece was likely to need, but for every one's sake she tried to speak as cheerfully as possible. It was clear that Isobel, in falling, had hurt her back as well as her head, and Dr Armitage had only been able sorrowfully to confirm what Dr Robson had feared: that there was very little hope that she would live through the night. It was evident from the symptoms

that inflammation had set in, and if that could not be speedily checked the end could not be far off.

'Is father not going to stay too?' asked Ronald; but his mother shook her head.

'He must go home, dearie. He had a very anxious case down in the village, and can't be spared; besides, he can do no good here. All is being done that can be done, and we are going to wire Sir Antony Jones's opinion to him. He will be here at eight o'clock, so the message will be at home almost as soon as you are.'

'What does Uncle Jack say about Isobel?' The question came from Ralph, and Mrs Armitage hesitated before she answered it.

'She is very ill, dearie,' she said at last gently; 'but she is in God's hands, and we must try to be content to leave her there. We can be quite sure that He will do what is best for us all.'

'Would it have made any difference if we had told,' asked Ronald—'if they had known at the very first—that she had fallen?'

'Perhaps it might, but we cannot say. That is past now, and it is no good looking back. You did not mean to conceal anything, so you

cannot blame yourselves; but remember it is always better to be open and frank, for you never know what mischief may follow if you try to hush a matter up. But I think it is time that you were getting on your greatcoats, boys, and seeing if Anne has finished your packing, and strapped your portmanteau. The carriage will be round in ten minutes, and I have some things I must say to your father.'

CHAPTER XIII.

A DREARY HOMECOMING.

TO the end of their lives Ronald and Vivian never forgot that journey home. For one thing, they had never travelled in the dark before, and everything looked strange and unreal.

Aunt Dora came down into the hall before they left, to kiss them and say good-bye; but her face was so white and drawn that Vivian almost shrank from her in fear, and the hopes that Ronald would have expressed for his little cousin's recovery died away on his lips. It was such a contrast to the bright, happy woman who had been like a playmate to them ever since they arrived.

They drove through the lighted streets in silence, for Dr Armitage was deep in thought, thinking about the sorrow that was threatening his favourite sister, and wondering if Sir Antony Jones, whose experience in such cases was very great, could possibly give her a ray of hope. At Victoria he bought the boys a handful of illustrated papers; but the light in

the carriage was so uncertain that they soon stopped looking at them, and sat back in their corners, staring into the shadowy darkness as it rushed past.

Ronald's mind was full of problems which he could not solve, the problems of life and death, which are so mysterious that in the face of them the oldest and wisest among us are but children, and can only trust where we cannot see; while Vivian was slowly fighting his way to a decision, which was very real and tangible, but which seemed so far above what his courage could attain to that as yet it was only a dream.

'Here we are, boys; gather up your things. It is a cold night, and I do not want to keep Black and the horse waiting.'

Both boys started at their father's words, and jumped up so quickly that they were flung against each other as the train drew up with a jerk at the well-known little station, and old Timms the porter came along the platform swinging his lamp, and crying out 'Sitt-ingham, Sitt-ingham!' at the top of his familiar voice.

He stopped when he came to their carriage

and opened the door. Apparently they were the only passengers who were going to alight.

'Well, young gentlemen,' he said heartily, lifting out the rugs, 'and how have you enjoyed yourselves up in London? And how did you leave Miss Dora—I beg her pardon, Mrs Osbourne? The other name always comes most familiar to me; 'twas the name we knew her by when she used to come and help the missus to nurse the little ones the year they were all down wi' the fever. Maria often says that if it hadn't been Miss Dora's soups and puddings Belinda wouldn't have been alive to-day.'

'Then Maria must think of Miss Dora to-night, Timms,' said the doctor sadly, 'for she is in great trouble. Her little girl, her only daughter, is very ill—almost hopelessly so, it seems to me. I have just been up to see her, and have left my wife there.'

'Eh, but I'm sorry to hear you say so, sir; very sorry!' said the old man, shouldering the portmanteau, and turning through the little white gate to where the carriage was standing; 'and so will Maria be when she hears. The only little lass, say you? But that is a

heavy sorrow. It seems to me, sir, it's always the best beloved that's took first. Though we'll hope that the little miss may be spared yet awhile. Children get over a lot.'

'I hope so, I'm sure. Good-night, Timms. Remember me to Maria.'

'Good-night, sir, and maybe you'll let us know what news they be in the morning, sir.'

Ronald and Vivian had already taken their seats, and it did not seem long until the carriage turned in at the lodge gates, and soon it drew up at the front door. A bright fire was blazing in the hall, and Lucy, little Dorothy's nurse, was waiting to help them off with their coats and see that everything was comfortable. But, oh, what a lonely home-coming it seemed without mother's cheery voice and bright face!

Even father seemed to notice the silence, for after having hurriedly glanced at one or two notes which were lying on his desk waiting for him, he turned to the maid. 'Where is Dorothy, nurse?' he asked. 'If she is awake we will have her down. The little lady must act mother for us to-night.—Mustn't she, boys?'

'Oh yes, father, do have her down,' they

both cried eagerly. 'We were afraid she might be asleep, but it would seem so much more "homey" if she were here.'

'I'm afraid she is asleep, sir,' said Lucy. 'I put her in her crib just before the carriage came. She had been watching for it since before six o'clock, and she got so tired she went to sleep in my arms, so I undressed her and put her in bed.'

'Then we must just do the best we can without her,' said the doctor, sitting down and beginning to pour himself out a cup of tea, while Lucy saw to the wants of the boys before she left the room.

It was a very silent meal, and it was a relief when it was over, although no one seemed quite to know what to do next. The doctor sat restlessly turning over the leaves of a medical journal; the boys wandered out into the hall, and stood looking out of the long, low window at the end of it without speaking. The window overlooked the road which led to the village, and from it they could see the bright yellow light which burned over the little shop which served as stationer's shop and book-club, as well as post-office.

They knew that old Giles Masterton, who acted as postman, would bring up the telegram as soon as it came; and as he always carried a lantern they would be able to mark his progress up the road in the darkness.

Nine o'clock struck at last, and yet they waited, huddled together behind a curtain; and when Lucy appeared and hinted at the advisability of going to bed they looked so distressed that she had not the heart to insist.

'The message will come all the same as if you were up, Master Vivian,' she said persuasively, 'and I'm sure your father will come and tell you what it is at once.' But Vivian only shook his head determinedly, and pressed his face a little closer to the pane.

'It must come soon if it is coming at all, Lucy,' said Ronald, 'for the office shuts at nine, and I think we can stay up until it comes. Father does not seem to mind, and we could never go to sleep until we know.'

'I'm going to stay up until it comes, no matter what any one says or thinks, so you needn't bother any more, Lucy,' broke out Vivian so fiercely that both Lucy and Ronald looked at him in surprise.

To Ronald, in the face of the trouble that was hanging over them, any outburst of temper seemed almost irreverent; but Lucy understood better, and with rare tact took no notice of the angry words. Instead of remonstrating with Vivian, as she might have done, or threatening him with his father's displeasure, she went quietly into the cloakroom and took down two greatcoats.

'Put this on, Master Ronald,' she said; 'and here is yours, Master Vivian; 'tis a hard frost to-night, and this hall is as cold as can be.

'There now,' as the boys silently obeyed her, and buttoned up the coats, 'you won't get cold with these on; and if you would like a good hot drink of cocoa before you go to bed come into the nursery. Miss Dorothy is sleeping so soundly you won't wake her, and I'll have the kettle boiling.'

Then she left them to wait in the darkness.

At last, just as the clock was chiming the half-hour, a tiny red speck appeared under the yellow lamp, and began to move slowly up the road. It was old Giles's lantern, and both boys drew a shuddering breath of suspense. What would the news be—life or death?

At last a tiny red speck appeared under the yellow lamp, and began to move slowly up the road.

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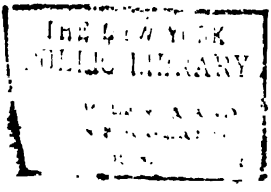
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They had not long to wait. Dr Armitage's listening ears had already caught the sound of the old postman's limp as he came up the frosty road, and he laid down his newspaper hastily; and, crossing the hall without noticing the two little figures behind the curtain, he opened the front door, letting in a gust of clear cold air as he did so, and went down the drive to meet him.

The boys crept to the door and watched breathlessly as he tore open the flimsy orange-coloured envelope and read its contents by the light of old Giles's lantern. When he had read it he crumpled it up in his hand and came slowly back to the house.

'What does it say, father?' asked Ronald. But he hardly needed to ask; he knew by the sad look on his father's face that the message was not one of hope.

'Ha, my boys!' said the doctor, starting at the sound of his eldest son's voice, 'I had almost forgotten you. It is time that you were both in bed. Come into the study, to the fire. Vivian, you look blue with cold.'

Then, when they had followed him into the study, he sat down in his arm-chair and drew

them gently to him. 'It is bad news, boys,' he said gravely, and his voice shook as he spoke. 'Sir Antony Jones can only say what Dr Robson and I said; I am much afraid that if dear little Isobel is living now she will not last through the night.'

'Oh father!' said Ronald, the tears running down his cheeks, 'how will Aunt Dora bear it? She never said so, but I feel sure that Isobel was more to her almost than Ralph or Claude. It was not that she loved them less, but Isobel was her only little girl. Oh, just think if it had been Dorothy!'

'God forbid,' said Dr Armitage involuntarily, and he pressed his arm round the boys who were so precious to him, and there was silence for a moment, broken only by Ronald's sobs, for Vivian, who was generally the more easily moved to tears, stood perfectly still and quiet.

When the doctor spoke again it was in his usual tone, though his manner was grave and sad. 'Well, boys, it is more than time that you were in bed. I must write some letters, and then go down and have a look at Widow Dallas's grandchild. She is ill too—

very ill—but I hope she will pull through. I will look in and see you when I come back, and say good-night if you are not asleep.'

He kissed them tenderly, whispering to them not to forget Isobel's name in their prayers, and then he went out, and they went slowly up to bed.

At the head of the stairs Ronald turned off, and went quietly towards the nursery, stifling his sobs as best he could.

'I'm going to give little Dorothy a kiss,' he whispered. 'I never knew before what a blessing a little sister is. Aren't you coming?'

But Vivian shook his head, while a curious stifled sound like a groan broke from his lips, and he went straight along the passage to his own room.

CHAPTER XIV.

VIVIAN CONQUERS.

WHEN Ronald returned from the nursery, some ten minutes later, he was surprised to find that the room was in darkness, and that Vivian had not begun to undress, for as a rule he was so quick in all his movements that he had expected to find him already in bed.

As he lit the candles on the dressing-table the misery in his little brother's face startled him, it was so white and drawn and hopeless.

'You look awfully cold, Vivi,' he began. 'Come along into the nursery and have some cocoa. Lucy gave me a cup to drink; awfully jolly and sweet it was, and I feel heaps better. I got awfully shivery and queer downstairs.'

'No, thanks, I don't want any, not to-night,' said Vivian shortly, pulling out a drawer with so much vehemence that Ronald took it as a hint that he wanted to be quiet, and began to undress without any further remark.

The boys generally read a short portion of the Bible to their mother before they came upstairs, and when she happened to be away from home—a very rare occurrence indeed—they read it to themselves in their own room; but to-night Ronald felt that somehow he dare not ask his brother to join him. He hardly knew how to treat him in this new, silent mood that had come over him, and he longed for his mother, who always understood people, and knew what to say to them.

And still, ever since he could remember, they had never gone to bed without the nightly lesson, and he did not like to do so on this night above all others, when the shadow of death had come nearer them than ever it had done in their lives before. Nervously he took up the two little Bibles which lay on a small table near the fireplace, under a beautiful print of Holman Hunt's 'Light of the World.'

'Aren't you going to read, Vivi,' he said timidly, holding out one of them to his brother; but Vivian only shook his head and began pulling off his shoes.

Ronald sighed, but he felt that further words

were useless. He knew that Vivian never liked to be argued with, especially when it was he, Ronald, who argued, so in silence he read his verses to himself, and knelt down to say his prayers. When he rose from his knees he found his brother in bed, with his face buried in the pillows.

He stood for a moment, perplexed how to act, and then he blew out the candle and went and sat down in the dark on the edge of Vivian's bed.

'Vivi, old chap,' he said softly, 'can't you tell me what's wrong? I feel sure that there is something worse than even Isobel's illness. You haven't said good-night to me, and you haven't said your prayers.'

The only answer was a restless movement, and another sharp, strangled sob, and then, just as Ronald was making up his mind to go back to bed, feeling it was no use to ask any more questions, Vivian burst out, 'I can't say my prayers, Ronald; I daren't. I have been so wicked. Oh, if you only knew!'

'But God knows,' said Ronald. 'He knows how wicked we all are, and yet that doesn't hinder Him listening to us. He will forgive us

and give us strength to be better afterwards. I wish mother were here; she can explain things so much better than I can.'

'Yes—but—if one has done something, and he doesn't want to tell, God won't hear him till he does,' said Vivian desperately. 'Do you remember that text that mother told us about, which says that if we have wickedness—iniquity or something is the word—in our heart, God won't hear us? Oh Ronald, I'm like Achan the son of Carmi, who hid the golden wedge in his tent. I've hidden a golden wedge, and now God is cursing everybody for my sake. First Joe, then Isobel, and perhaps He'll take mother and Dorothy and father and you.'

Ronald was really frightened. He remembered how Vivian had fainted in the morning, and he began to fear that all the excitement and trouble had turned his brain. He had heard of people getting brain-fever, and losing their reason when they had had some terrible shock or a great deal of worry. If his father had only been in the house! But he had heard the front door close a few minutes before, and he knew that he had gone out to see the sick girl of whom he had spoken. He thought of

going for Lucy, and had turned towards the door to do so when it struck him that if there was any truth in what Vivian said, if he really had done something wrong, then it was not a thing to speak to a servant about, so he turned back to his brother's bedside instead.

'It's never too late to tell things, Vivi,' he said soothingly. 'Father has gone out just now, else you could have told him; so if I were you I should just tell God instead, and then go to sleep. Perhaps things may look different in the morning. Would you like me to call Lucy?' he added doubtfully. 'If you feel really ill I could go for her.'

'No, no, not Lucy!' cried Vivian in alarm. 'Just leave me alone, Ronald; you can't help me.'

And Ronald, who by this time was shivering with cold, crept into his own little bed at the other side of the room, feeling sorely perplexed. He lay and strained his ears for any sign of his father's return, intending when he heard his step to creep downstairs and tell him what a funny state Vivian was in; but he must have fallen asleep, for when he was awakened

by hearing Vivian moving on the other side of the room, he fancied that it was morning.

'Whatever are you doing, Vivian?' he asked, all his fears about his brother returning. 'It is not time to get up yet; it is quite dark, and I don't hear any one stirring in the house.'

'Yes, there is,' said Vivian, and there was a determined ring in his voice which reassured Ronald. Anyhow it was quite clear that his brother knew what he was doing. 'Father has just come in, and I'm going down to tell him all that I have done. Perhaps none of you will speak to me again when you know, and perhaps I'll be sent to prison; but I can't stand this any longer, and perhaps God will spare Isobel.'

There was a glimmer of light from the passage as he opened the door, and the next moment he was gone, leaving Ronald sitting up in his bed in astonishment. Either Vivian was going to be ill—and the thought crossed his mind that what had been so fatal to Isobel might have hurt Vivian more than any one had supposed—or there was some great ugly mystery which had yet to be explained; and as he remembered one or two little things which

had troubled him at Eversley, but which he had forgotten—the muddy indoor shoes, the wet coat, and Vivian's evening excursion out into the rain, and his fright when he heard of Monarch's death—he felt sick with apprehension as to what new trouble might be coming to mar the happiness of their pleasant family-life.

'Eh, what?' said Dr Armitage, looking in perplexity at the little white-robed, white-faced figure which stood just inside his study door. He had returned from his late visit to Widow Dallas's granddaughter, and had been gathering up his papers and putting out the lamps, when the sound of Vivian's voice arrested him, and, turning round, he saw the startling apparition.

'My dear, are you ill? You should have sent Ronald down,' he said in alarm, and crossing the room, he would have taken the little boy on his knee, but Vivian pushed his arm away and shrank back against the wall.

'You won't touch me when you know, father,' he began, and his voice did not seem as if it belonged to him at all, 'for I'm a thief, and a liar, and a murderer, or at least as good as one, for it is all my fault that Isobel is dying;

and I thought—I thought—if I told all about it, God might make her better.'

Here he stopped to moisten his lips, for they were so dry he could not go on.

'My dear, you do not know what you are saying!' said his father starting forward, greatly alarmed, fearing, like Ronald, that the excitement of the past day had affected the little fellow's brain.

'No, no, father,' cried Vivian passionately, putting out both his hands to keep him back, 'I'm quite sensible, and you must listen, for it's all true. I stole the pistol, and I told lies, and they think it was Joe, and I talked to the burglar, and he got me to give cakes to Monarch. That is the only bit I didn't *mean* to do, for I believed the man's story, and I never thought that the cakes would poison the dog. And I hid the pistol in a hole in the branch of the old oak-tree. Isobel was showing the hole to me when we fell off.'

'Come here, Vivian, and tell me all about it, just as it happened from the beginning. Nay, my boy, do not shrink from me; surely you know father better than that. If this story is true, I shall be deeply grieved and

deeply disappointed; but you are doing all you can to set things right, and I will stand by you. I promise you that.'

For a moment Vivian swayed backwards and forwards, and his father caught hold of him, fearing another faint attack, then with a hoarse cry the little boy threw himself into his arms and broke into a perfect passion of tears. After the strain and dread of the last few days the note of kindness in his father's voice was almost more than he could bear.

'Oh father,' he gasped, 'you won't send me to prison, will you? You won't send me out of the house, not even when you hear the whole story?'

'Certainly not, my boy,' and the arm that was round him tightened its hold. 'Fathers are not like that. I may be angry—very likely I shall be—if you have done anything to deserve it; but remember nothing would make me turn against you. Now, as soon as you are calm enough you will tell me everything.'

Both the boys had been well trained in self-control since their babyhood; but it was nearly five minutes before Vivian could steady his voice sufficiently to speak, and it was in

sadly broken words that he told his tale. He did not spare himself. The burden of concealment had lain too heavily on his conscience for that, and now that he had broken the ice, it was a relief to tell out the whole sad story.

Dr Armitage listened in silence, only asking a question now and then to make some point clear, his grief and dismay increasing every moment. He had been prepared for some confession of childish wrong-doing, and had set down Vivian's agitation as a necessary result of all the day's excitement, and had thought that the same reason had led him to exaggerate his fault; but the tale he heard was far different from that. For a moment he forgot the sharp temptation which the finding of the pistol must have been to a boy of Vivian's temperament, and was almost stunned to find that his own son, who had been brought up with so much care, could have practised and carried out such a tangled scheme of lies and deceit.

When the story was fully told there was silence for a minute.

'Oh Vivian, Vivian! what will mother say?' said Dr Armitage at last; and at his question,

and the grieved tone in which it was spoken, the little boy shivered.

'I don't think she will ever love me again,' he sobbed, 'and I don't deserve that she should.'

'Oh yes, she will, old man,' said the doctor, trying to speak gently in spite of his bitter disappointment. 'You have owned up your fault, and that is the first step towards making amends; only remember you must face the consequences whatever they are. Uncle Walter and Aunt Dora must be told, and Joe must be set at liberty and his name cleared at once; and you must tell the police exactly what happened on Sunday, and describe the man who gave you the cakes for Monarch. It won't be easy for you, I'm afraid.'

But Vivian was too broken-down and exhausted to take much thought for the morrow. 'If only Isobel would get better!' he sobbed. 'Surely God will see that I'm sorry, and give her back?'

'That must be as God wills,' said his father gravely; 'and now you must go to bed, and try to sleep, and to-morrow we will talk about it again and decide what is to be done. I think perhaps that you had better go back with me

to London, for the policemen must be told about the man in the summer-house at once, and they will want you to give them his description; but whether Aunt Dora is told at present or not will depend on the news that we get in the morning.'

Then, seeing how worn out Vivian was, he lifted him in his arms as if he were a baby, and gave him a fatherly kiss. 'Don't despair, old man,' he said. 'Remember every one can build fresh beginnings on the ruins made by their old faults;' and then he carried him up to bed, as he used to do in the far-off days before Dorothy was born. He pushed the door of the bedroom gently open so as not to disturb Ronald; but Ronald was awake, and eager to know what had happened, and why Vivian had been so long downstairs.

'Shall I tell him?' asked Dr Armitage. He felt that this at least should be left to Vivian to decide. The answer was soon given.

'Oh Ronnie, Ronnie!' cried Vivian, going back to his baby name for his brother, 'let me come into your bed;' and, clinging to the elder brother, whom he had so often laughed at but whom he loved with all his heart, he sobbed

out his confession for the second time, and then fell asleep with his head on Ronald's shoulder, comforted by his simple words of encouragement:

'Never mind, you've been brave and confessed; and I'm sure God will make it all right about Isobel.'

CHAPTER XV.

ANOTHER MYSTERY.

THOROUGHLY worn out by all he had gone through, it was late next morning before Vivian awoke. As his eye fell on his empty bed he wondered drowsily what had happened, and why he had slept with Ronald, and why Ronald was up and about while he had not even been called.

Then, with a flash, his homecoming last night and his confession to his father came into his mind, and with it the thought of his little cousin's illness, and all the sorrow and trouble and disgrace which he had brought not only on himself but on his friends.

He was wide awake now, and he turned over on his pillow with a groan, for he knew that in a short time he would have to meet his father once more, perhaps even go back to London with him, and the whole sad story would need to be told over again, and it would be much harder to tell it to-day than it had been last night, when he was excited and his

feelings strung up by the thought of Isobel's danger.

'Isobel will probably be dead by now,' he thought dully. 'Well, she would never know how wicked and false her playfellow had been; but it would be all the harder to have to face Uncle Walter and Aunt Dora and tell the miserable truth to them in the midst of their terrible trouble.

Then he began to wonder what punishment he would get; perhaps he would be sent to some very strict school where only bad boys were sent—he had heard of such places—and perhaps little Dorothy, and even Ronald, would not be allowed to see him or to talk about the brother who had brought such disgrace on them all.

Bitter tears filled his eyes at the thought; and yet, mingling with the bitterness and deep sense of shame, there was a feeling of relief that now, at all events, the truth was known, and he need not go about with the awful fear of discovery hanging over him.

A footstep sounded on the stair. Was it his father? His face flushed at the thought of seeing him again. But no, it was too light

a step for his, and it was Ronald who pushed the door open and looked cautiously into the room.

His face brightened when he saw that his brother was awake. 'Look here, old fellow,' he said, crossing over to where Vivian lay, and shaking a yellow envelope in his face, 'this came in half-an-hour ago, and father said I might bring it up to you when you were awake. It's good news this time,' and his voice shook a little. 'It's to say that Isobel is better, so you see God has answered our prayers after all.'

With trembling hands Vivian took the piece of flimsy paper, and read the words which it contained: 'Isobel distinctly better. Doctors hopeful.' Then he lay back on his pillow and gazed out of the window without speaking, but with such a curious gladness on his face that Ronald, standing by, dared not break the silence.

To Vivian that message of good news seemed a sign and seal of forgiveness. After all, God had not forsaken him in spite of his sin. 'And when he was yet a long way off, his father saw him, and had compassion on him.'

The old story seemed very real to the little boy then. It had been told by holy lips, many hundreds of years ago, to a crowd of eager listeners in Galilee; but with a great rush of gladness he felt that it was as true to-day as it was then. He was the prodigal son. He had wandered into a far country—a country of sin and shame and falsehood—and yet, the moment he had turned his face in the direction of the Father's home, the moment he had shown his repentance by his confession, the Father had heard him, and had had compassion on him, and had answered the unspoken prayer which he had not even dared to offer. And if God had been so ready to help him in his sore need and anxiety, would He not also help him in the ordeal which lay before him, when every one who up till now had loved him and thought much of him would learn what manner of boy he really was.

'They were your prayers, Ronnie,' he said at last; 'but perhaps God saw that I was really sorry, and perhaps that did as well.'

'Yes, and saw that you had made up your mind to own up,' said Ronald; 'and you know that mother always says that the real test of

being sorry is the owning up and the trying to put things right as far as we can.'

'There will be an awful lot to put right,' said Vivian sadly, a sudden fit of depression coming over him. 'Even if Isobel gets well, there is all Aunt Dora's silver gone, and Joe Flinders put in prison.'

'But Joe Flinders needn't stay in prison when they know that it wasn't he who took the pistol,' said Ronald; and then he wished he had not spoken when he noticed the distressed look that came to his brother's face at the mention of the pistol, and remembered all that must happen before Joe could be set at liberty.

'Never mind, old chap,' he said tenderly, putting his arm round Vivian's shoulder; 'just set your teeth, and go through with it. Father will help you, and I will stand by you for all that I am worth.'

The conversation was interrupted by Lucy's entrance with a breakfast-tray.

'There's good news this morning, isn't there, Master Vivian?' she said cheerfully, noticing the little boy's pale cheeks and heavy eyes, which she set down to the excitement of

yesterday and the anxiety about his cousin. 'You must try to eat a good breakfast, for it seems that you have to go back to London with the master.'

Vivian started at the words, and turned his face away from the kindly girl who was arranging his pillows comfortably behind him, and fussing over him as though he were ill.

So there was to be no pause, no respite. He was to go up to London this very day, and even before he had set out the ordeal had begun, for he saw from Lucy's wondering tone that every one would at once begin to ask the reason for this sudden return to town, and the truth was bound to come out. To have Lucy, and cook, and old Black (who had known him ever since he was a baby) all know him now as a thief and a liar would be intolerable.

But Ronald, true to his promise of a minute before of 'standing by him for all he was worth,' answered for him.

'Yes, Vivian has to go back with father because he was not at church on Sunday, and he saw a man in the garden who may have been one of the thieves. And the police want to hear more about him.'

The words were strictly true, and yet they explained everything so naturally that Vivian wondered how he had ever thought Ronald stupid.

'Dear, dear,' said Lucy, looking admiringly at Vivian, 'so you really saw him, Master Vivian! No wonder you look white and shaken. He might have murdered you, he might, when there was no one about. London must be a dreadful place. I am glad I don't live there. Have another cup of tea? No? Even if I put two lumps of sugar in it? Well, to be sure, it has taken away your appetite, and little wonder. And you must be ready for the twelve o'clock train too! It is almost time that you were getting up. See, here comes little Miss Dorothy. She shall sit on your bed till I take down the tray and get you some hot water, and then she must come into the nursery while you dress.'

Vivian was not destined, however, to meet his father before he started, or to go to London with the twelve o'clock train. If he had done so things might have fallen out very differently from what they did.

Many a time in the dreary days that followed did Dr Armitage wish with a groan

that the miller's pony had not taken it into its head to run away just on that particular morning. As it was, the pony took fright at an innocent old woman who was walking down the road with a bundle of sticks on her back, and it threw its rider, the miller's only son, who had his leg broken and his head cut, besides being bruised all over, so that the doctor, who was sent for in hot haste by the boy's frantic parents, found it absolutely impossible to go to London by the train he had intended travelling by. Indeed, he did not even go home to lunch, but had some bread and cheese in the miller's kitchen; and then, having set the boy's leg, and seen him come back to consciousness, he sent a message home by a passing labourer to bid Vivian meet him at the station at three o'clock, and went on to make one or two important visits which needed to be made.

Indeed, in the end, he nearly missed the train, for it had come into the station before he appeared; and Ronald, who had driven down with Vivian to keep up his courage and give him a cheery set-off, was at his wits' end whether to take his brother's ticket or not.

'All right; jump in, Vivi,' said his father, as he took his handbag from his eldest son.—'You were a thoughtful boy, Ronald, to bring me this. I forgot all about sleeping things when I sent the message, and we won't get back to-night now.—Tickets? Oh, I will pay at the other end.—Good-bye, Ronald, you will have a dull evening, I am afraid, my boy.—All right, Timms.' And then the train moved out of the station, and Ronald made his way slowly back to the carriage, feeling very sorry for his little white-faced brother, and wishing that he could have gone along with him.

Poor Vivian wished the same wish a great many times as the express flew quickly along towards London. He had dreaded being alone with his father, and yet to have been alone with him now would have been a relief, for there were two other gentlemen in the carriage, both of whom knew Dr Armitage, and were eager for any fresh news he could give them respecting the robbery.

So the little boy had to sit in silent misery and hear every detail of the robbery, of which the newspapers were full, talked over from every point of view. His father tried to spare

him, and to direct the conversation to other topics; but it was not easily done, for both the gentlemen were old and fussy, and they had to argue over every point, and discuss every mysterious circumstance until Dr Armitage was at his wits' end how to answer their questions and yet hide from them how much he knew, and poor Vivian was in such a state of nervousness that he could have screamed aloud.

The journey came to an end at last, however, as all things do, whether they be pleasant or unpleasant, and the train steamed into Victoria Station, where the electric lamps were already blazing.

'Now for a cab, my boy!' said Dr Armitage, turning and laying his hand on Vivian's shoulder kindly, after he had helped the two garrulous old gentlemen to get all their belongings out of the carriage, and had shaken hands with them, and said good-bye. 'All those questions were rather hard on you, weren't they? It is what you must expect, I fear, for a time. But never mind, you have fought the first bit of your fight, and you must just make up your mind to be brave and to go through with it.'

The kind words brought the tears to Vivian's eyes. 'It is mother,' he said huskily. 'I don't feel as if I could meet her.'

'Nonsense,' said his father cheerily, for he saw that the little fellow had had enough to bear, and needed some encouragement if he were not to break down altogether, 'mother is never hard on any one who has owned up and said that they are sorry; and I am sure that Aunt Dora and Uncle Walter will not be too hard on you either, although, of course, you must expect to find them both angry and disappointed with you at first. But we mustn't stand talking here.—Hi, cabman!'

The cabman noticed the doctor's signal, and turned his horse's head; but just at that moment there was a cry, and a rush of people to another part of the station.

A man had slipped while coupling a moving engine to a train, and the two first carriages had gone over his legs. Some one came running along calling for a doctor, and Dr Armitage immediately offered his services.

'Wait here till I come, my boy,' he said. 'See, the man will let you get into his cab, and will wait for me at the end of the station.

—I may be some time, cabby,' he added, looking up at the red-faced man on the box. 'If the poor fellow is badly hurt I may have some bandaging to do before they can remove him to the hospital; but I'll be back again as quickly as I can.'

'All right, sir,' said the man, touching his hat. 'I will wait for you under the great clock yonder.'

The doctor hurried away without wasting more time. As he expected, the accident was a serious one. The poor man's legs were both badly crushed, and it was some time before he could check the hæmorrhage sufficiently to make it safe for him to be removed to the hospital. When at last the sufferer had been made as comfortable as possible, and the doctor had helped to place him in a station ambulance, and had seen it start swiftly for its destination, he hurried back to find his cab.

There it was, waiting, as its driver had promised, just opposite the great clock, the man apparently half-asleep on the box.

The doctor glanced up at the clock as he passed it.

'Sorry to keep you, cabby; but I couldn't

help it,' he said pleasantly to the man, who must have been sleeping with one eye open, for he straightened himself and gathered up the reins as soon as he saw his fare appear. 'And we have a long drive before us too. We wish to go to Hampstead, to a house called "Eversley," just on the Heath. I will direct you to it when we get there.'

The man touched his hat with a smile which somehow lit up the whole of his rough, weather-beaten face. 'My horse will soon take you over the ground. She's a rare good little beast, and knows how to go. I hope the young gentleman isn't very cold. I thought once of saying to him that he should go to the waiting-room over there, and then I thought as 'ow you might be here at any minute.'

'Oh, he'll be all right,' said the doctor, opening the door.—'Are you asleep, old fellow?' he asked briskly. 'I have been as quick as I could; but it has taken me fully a quarter of an hour.'

There was no answer, and he sprang into the cab with an exclamation of alarm. Had Vivian really gone to sleep, or, worn out with the strain and excitement, had he suddenly been

taken ill? Impatiently he groped all round in the darkness. There was the travelling-rug, and there was the hand-bag on the floor—he tripped over it, and for one horrible moment thought it was his son. Then he struck a match and looked round. The truth which had been dawning on him for the last few seconds, and which he had refused to believe, was now quite plain, quite certain. The cab was empty. Vivian had disappeared.

CHAPTER XVI.

A VAIN SEARCH.

'THE young gentleman not there? Why, sir, that's impossible,' said the cabman, astonishment written on every feature of his honest red face, as the excited doctor jumped out of the cab again and demanded rather sharply where his son had gone. 'You shut the door yourself when you left, and he was inside right enough then, and I would have heard him if he had opened the door since, and shut it again behind him.'

'But I tell you he is gone,' said the doctor. 'Here is the bag, and the rug, and even his gloves; but the boy has got out, that is clear enough.'

'I can hardly think as 'ow I didn't hear him,' answered the man, rubbing his head in perplexity. 'But, anyhow, he can't be far away. He has got tired of waiting, no doubt, and slipped out, and has gone to the bookstall or the waiting-room. He 'll be there all right, sir, never fear;' and he smiled to himself at the

nervousness of 'country folk,' as Dr Armitage set off, almost at a run, in the direction of the bookstall.

But neither there nor in any of the waiting-rooms did he find Vivian; and although he scoured every nook and cranny of the station, accompanied by a policeman whom he sent for in hot haste, and made inquiries at the booking-office and the bookstall, and questioned all the outside porters, it was all in vain. No one had seen a boy answering to Vivian's description. The little fellow had vanished, leaving no trace behind him.

The half-frantic doctor wished to set out at once to search for him in the adjoining streets, but the policeman dissuaded him.

'"Twould do no good, sir,' he said. 'If the young gentleman has run away—given you the slip for any reason—he'll be half-a-mile or more from here now, and you may as well look for a needle in a haystack as look for him in the network of streets that lie between here and the river. We'll go to a telephone-office and we'll telephone his description to all the police stations in London. I'll take the cab-man's number, although he's all right; I know

him for as decent a man as ever lived, and you go quietly home, and probably you will have news of the youngster by midnight.'

'But he wouldn't run away. He couldn't run away,' argued the doctor, although a horrible suspicion began to come over him that Vivian, tempted by the fear of the exposure that lay before him, might have done so. 'He has only been in London once before in his life; he does not know a soul in it except the friends whose house we are going to; and, besides, he has not a penny in his pocket that I know of.'

Policeman X10 shook his head. 'Lads are queer, sir,' he said. 'One never knows what they are up to. You say you have had no disagreement or anything? He wasn't being took to school, or anything of that sort? Of course you know best; but to me it looks pretty like as if 'e had given you the slip. It ain't likely that a boy of his age could be lifted bodily at this time of day. 'Tain't as as if 'e had been a little un. Hadn't a notion of the sea, had he? It's jolly cold weather to try that little tip. All the same, we had better keep a lookout at the docks.'

'No, I was not taking him to school,' replied Dr Armitage, ignoring the man's hint about 'any disagreement,' and feeling almost angry with him for coming so near the truth in his conjectures; but during the long, cold drive up to Hampstead he was forced to admit to himself that in all probability he was right, and that Vivian, goaded on by the thought of the ordeal that lay before him, had taken the desperate step of running away.

Bitterly did he blame himself for leaving the boy alone under the circumstances, although he felt that he could not honestly accuse himself of being harsh or unkind to him, and he remembered gladly the few words which had passed between them at the station, and the promise he had held out to Vivian that, now that he had spoken out and told the truth, his mother and he would stand by him, and help him through the rest.

Up at Eversley bright faces greeted him. The improvement which had set in in Isobel's condition in the early morning had been maintained, and Sir Antony Jones, who had just paid a second visit, had declared his belief that, if she went on as she was doing,

the danger would be over by the following morning. The threatened inflammation had subsided.

'Of course she will need care for a considerable time, and may have to be kept on her back for a month or two. I suspect a slight injury to the spine. But nothing permanent —nothing permanent. And with a garden like yours, Mrs Osbourne, she could not be better situated.'

And with this favourable verdict, the great man had departed, leaving thankful hearts behind him.

In the face of such relief from pressing anxiety—for there seemed no reason to fear that Isobel would not pass a good night—Dr Armitage shrank from telling his story and bringing another cloud down on the hearts which had gone through so much already.

Even if he had wished to remain silent, however, he could not have done so, for his wife's loving eyes soon saw that something was amiss, and the whole sad story had to come out. And a startling story it was.

To Mrs Armitage, with her faith in her boys' truthfulness and high-mindedness, the news of

Vivian's deceit came as a great shock, and for the moment everything else seemed to fade from her mind. His disappearance, his probable danger even, did not seem to touch her as the knowledge of his falseness did.

'Oh my boy!' she moaned, 'my little boy, whom I have prayed for all his life, and tried to lead in the right way! I have seen it all along, his moral cowardice, his love of praise. And it has led to this. And now he has run away because he dare not face his own mother! Oh Jack,' she cried piteously, turning to her husband, 'I think I would almost rather he had died when he had that fever so badly three years ago than that you should have to tell me all this terrible story.'

'Come, come, Margaret,' said Uncle Walter kindly, for he saw that his sister-in-law scarcely knew what she was saying, 'this is unlike you. All the strain and anxiety has been too much for you, and now this news on the top of all! It is a bad business, and I don't wonder that you are surprised and grieved. I know what we would have felt if it had been Ralph. But, after all, the poor little chap is only eleven, and he has owned up like a

brick, remember that. This will be a lesson to him that he will remember all his life, and he will make a fine man yet, or my name is not Walter Osbourne. Faith, I doubt if I would have had the courage to have made a clean breast of it myself, as he has done, at his age, after getting so far down in the mud. It shows that he has the right sort of grit in him.

'But the first thing is to find him, and bring him back, and then let the police know all he has to tell us about the rascal whom he saw in the summer-house. I expect the whole gang will soon be caught once they have his description. And I promise you that Vivian will hear no more than is necessary about the whole business from any one in this house. Of course the police will have to know about the pistol, in order to release Joe; but we can hush it up in some way.

'In the meantime, I'll run up and tell Dora, and do you get Jack and me something to eat—something solid remember—and we will go down to Scotland Yard, and see that everything is being done to trace the poor little chap. Probably they have got him by now. Very

likely he only ran out of the station to have a look at the lighted streets, and took a wrong turning. We will take a look round the hospitals too,' he added, for he wanted to break the strange calm hardness which had fallen on Vivian's mother, which was so unlike her, and so unlike the passionate love which she had for her children.

The words had their expected effect.

'The hospitals!' she said sharply. 'Surely you don't think that an accident can have happened? You don't know Vivian. He is much too wide-awake to allow himself to be run over.' But the mother-love, which the shock seemed almost to have deadened, was awake again, and when in a few minutes Aunt Dora came down, full of sympathy, and thinking of nothing but Vivian's mysterious disappearance, making all possible excuses for him, and blaming herself bitterly for not noticing his doings more closely, and thus making it impossible for such things to happen, her sister-in-law blessed her in her heart for her kind words, and, laying down her head on her shoulder, relieved her overburdened heart by a good cry, after which she

was once more her calm, practical, hopeful self again.

But although every police station in London was warned, and every railway station watched, every hospital visited, and every city missionary told of Vivian's mysterious disappearance, day after day passed, and nothing was heard of him.

Hope dies hard, however, and long after the detectives who had been employed to try to solve the mystery had given it up, and expressed their opinion that the lost boy had wandered from the station down to the river, either out of pure boyish curiosity, or in the hope of finding a boat in which he could embark as cabin-boy, and so escape any possible punishment which might await him, and had missed his footing in the fog, which it was remembered had come down rather thickly that Tuesday night, and had fallen into the river and been drowned, the members of the two households where he had been known and loved still clung to the hope that some day he would turn up again.

But month succeeded month, and when at last Easter arrived, and no clue was to be

had to the mystery, they were compelled to give up their slender hope, and to mourn for him as dead—mourn him all the more bitterly because he had left them with a cloud hanging over him, and perhaps lost his life in trying to hide from them, because he dreaded their anger.

CHAPTER XVII.

MADAME GENVIÈVE.

SPRING comes early in Brittany, and by the end of May the apple-blossom is already almost over, while the hedgerows on each side of the smooth, broad roads are one tangled glory of golden broom, sweet-smelling honeysuckle, and delicate bramble-blossom.

But up in the mountains of Basse Bretagne, the *Montagnes Noirs* as they are called, it is different. The climate is colder there, and the seasons later, reminding one more of Scotland. Indeed, the scenery is not unlike certain parts of Scotland; for, as one winds up the lonely roads that lead to the heart of these hills, one leaves the vegetation of the south behind them, and reaches a region of bare, heather-covered moors, peat-bogs, and low, scrubby fir-trees.

The country is sparsely populated. The traveller only comes across a cottage at long intervals, and when he does pass one he looks at the low walls and thatched roof, wondering

what sort of lives the people live who dwell inside.

At the door of one of these lonely cottages a woman was standing one bright May morning—in the May that followed the events which we have described in the last chapters—shading her eyes from the sun.

She was dressed in the ordinary Breton peasant's dress—a black gown, with a great white cap and a white plaited collar, and her face was wrinkled and weather-beaten.

'Pierrè, Pierre, where art thou?' she cried, scanning the bare moorland with her keen black eyes; 'it is already seven o'clock, and the pigs are not fed, nor the chickens, and the cow waits in her stall to be led out to pasture.'

There was no answer, and she shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

'Plague upon the boy,' she muttered, 'and upon those who brought him! Three francs a week doth not go far on his food, for he eats like an ox, and as for trouble—*hein!*' And she shrugged her shoulders again in the expressive way only practised by a Frenchwoman or an Italian, then she proceeded to search the

'Thou lazy dreamer!' she said, pulling him to his feet by the collar of his blue cotton blouse.

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wretched little outhouses which adjoined her cottage for the delinquent.

She found him at last, a little white-faced, dark-haired lad, clad in a blue cotton suit, and wearing the wooden sabots of the country. He was lying asleep in the sun behind a diminutive haystack, which looked as if hay-crops in that part of the country were wont to be scanty.

He woke with a start as the woman shook him roughly, and shrank away from her with a look of fear in his brown eyes.

'Thou lazy dreamer!' she said, pulling him to his feet by the collar of his blue cotton blouse, and giving him a push in the direction of the pig-sty, 'there is all thy work to do, and instead of doing it thou liest and sleepest as if thou wert the son of a lord. Make haste now, and feed the cow and the chickens, and take the cow to the pasture over by the bog-side yonder. See, if thou lingerest I shall take the stick, as I took it yesterday.'

Apparently the threat was no idle one, for the little boy went off hurriedly. He entered the cottage, and in a few minutes he returned dragging a pail which was evidently too heavy

for him, and with much exertion managed at last to empty its contents into a great stone trough. Then he let down some low wooden bars, and from a rough enclosure two or three long-legged, bony pigs rushed out, jostling one another, and almost knocking the little fellow over in their haste to get at their food.

He stood watching them dully, leaning against the gate almost as if he had not energy to go on to his next task.

Perhaps the woman noticed this, and perhaps the thought rose in her mind that it would not pay to work the little foreigner—whom her son Jacques had brought from Paris one cold January day, bidding her at all costs to keep him safely, and guard against any possibility of his escape—too hard. For he had already been ill once, and he might fall ill again; and if anything happened to him then the three francs which Jacques sent her regularly for his board would cease to arrive, and the little hoard of silver which she was gathering in the old cracked coffee-pot which stood on the shelf above her bed would grow no bigger, and that would be a thousand pities, for she cared more for silver francs than for children.

'See here, Pierre,' she said, going into the cottage and returning with two thick slices of rye-bread, between which she had placed a morsel of meat and a sliced shalot, 'it is fine and warm in the sun, so thou and Nanette shall have a little *fête*. Here is thy dinner; thou canst carry it with thee, and lie out in the sun all day on the hillside, while Nanette grazes to her heart's content. See, thou canst go at once. I can attend to the poultry.'

The boy took the sandwich, which the old woman wrapped up in a piece of greasy paper, and put it carefully away in a little wallet which he wore slung over his shoulder.

'Shall I tether Nanette, madame, or shall I let her go free?' he asked. He spoke in the same patois in which the woman had spoken, but his accent was strangely foreign.

'Thou canst lead her with the rope until thou reachest the other side, and then thou canst let her graze where she will,' replied the woman; 'only thou must keep in sight of the cottage, and be home ere the sun goes down.'

She turned away, and the boy took down a length of rope from the wall, and deftly slipped it over the horns of a gentle-looking little dun

cow which had come forward, and was licking the sides of the trough where the pigs had fed, in the vain hope that she might find some of their food still sticking to the edges.

He led her away, and the docile animal followed him quietly, for Breton cows are accustomed to being led out to graze, and soon the two were picking their way gingerly over the quaking bog, which was still soft with the winter rain. Once arrived at the other side, where there was a strip of short, sweet grass, the boy slipped the rope from Nanette's horns, and, climbing a short way up the side of the hill, he lay down in the sun and began to think.

Poor little fellow! his thoughts were always the same, and they were sometimes so confused that he could hardly tell whether the things he thought about were real or not. They floated through his brain, broken up and confused, like the colours in a kaleidoscope, and there were only two things that he was ever quite certain about. One was that he had not always lived in the low thatched cottage which he had just left; the other, that he was an English boy, and not a French one.

There were other things which he remembered vaguely, and which he was sure were real, although the old woman at the cottage, Madame Genviève, as she was called, always said that they were but feverish dreams that had fixed themselves in his brain during the illness which he had had after he had come to live with her.

This illness had taken away his memory, so she told him, and had filled his head with strange fancies, and had made him forget that he was her grandson, and had always lived in Paris until his mother died, and his father—her son Jacques—had brought him to the little cottage in the *Montagnes Noirs* to be the comfort of his old grandmother's failing years.

But somehow Pierre did not believe all this, although he had learned to hold his tongue; for at first, when he used to talk of a strange memory which was always in his mind, and would speak the language which came easiest to his tongue, she would look round anxiously as if she feared that some one might hear him, and then she would fly into a passion, and scold him, and even beat him; and afterwards, when her anger had cooled, and the fear had

gone out of her eyes, she would stroke his head, and tell him that those were but sick fancies, which he must be careful to hide, in case the inspector down at Châteauneuf should hear about him, and take him away and shut him up in an institution, as he did to all people who thought such thoughts.

So Pierre learned to hold his tongue and keep his thoughts to himself. This had been easy at first, when the least effort to think made his head ache as though it would split; but it was more difficult now that the fine weather, and the long days spent in the open air, were making his poor little body, and his mind too, stronger.

To-day as he lay on the hillside in the sun these thoughts were clearer than ever. He remembered a big station, all lit up, and he was there with some one else, a grown-up man it seemed to him, who did not call him Pierre, but some other name which had quite a different sound. Bah! he did not remember, but that did not matter. Perhaps the name would come into his mind later, as other things had come. The gentleman had gone away somewhere, and had told him to wait, and he had waited. Then

some other men had passed, carrying bags, and talking to one another. They were gentlemen, he could remember that, wearing warm coats with fur collars. As he was looking at them, suddenly the face of one of them grew into a coarse, bad face, with a stubbly beard and a patch over one eye, and it seemed to him that he wanted to catch that man very much. So he ran after him, and cried, 'I know you! I know you!' The man had passed, but he turned round, and, lo and behold! he had a gentleman's face once more. Then, somehow, Pierre was in a railway carriage with the gentleman and his friends, and the train was moving, and he wanted to get out; but one of the men laughed and said something about his knowing too much. And then it seemed that in this strange memory he struggled, and tried to scream, and some one put his hand over his mouth. And then he tried to bite the hand; he remembered his teeth going into the soft flesh, then he must have fallen, for he felt a dreadful pain at the back of his head, and everything stopped for a while; and when he woke up he was in the little box-bed in the thatched cottage on the moor, and the old

woman was sitting cowering over the peat-fire talking to a stranger, who presently put some money in her hand and went away.

The story was very vague and confused. There was much about it which he could not understand, and when he tried to remember any more his head always ached; but somehow he knew that it was true, and he knew too that he was an English boy, though why an English boy should be living with an old woman in the heart of the *Montagnes Noirs* was more than he could make out.

But slowly a great determination was forming itself in his poor confused mind, and that was that one day he would run away. He knew that somewhere, to the north, over these hills, lay St Brieuc, and St Brieuc was near the sea. So much he had learned from the neighbouring peasants whom he saw occasionally, though very, very rarely, and they knew, because at Easter-time they drove their lean pigs and cows to sell at the market there. And over the sea was England.

'Some day,' thought Pierre, as he opened his satchel and broke off a corner of his sandwich, 'when the days are longer, and my legs do

not feel so tired—in a month perhaps—I will run away, and walk to St Brieuc, and there perhaps I may find a boat, and I will go to England. And when I am in England, then I will remember.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

RUNNING AWAY.

FOR another hour or two Pierre lay still in the sun, munching his black bread slowly, and keeping a watchful eye on Nanette; then he suddenly bethought himself that if he went to the top of the hill he would be able to see the high road which he knew lay on the other side, and which ran from Carhaix to Londéac. He had only twice caught a glimpse of it: once when he had been sent up the hillside after some goats which had strayed, and another time when the old woman had gone with the post-cart to Carhaix, and he had walked to meet the cart with her, to help her to carry her butter and eggs.

As a rule he was so closely watched that he had never had time to wander so far alone; but to-day he saw his opportunity, for if he lay just on the top of the hill he would still be in sight of the cottage, and he could keep one eye on Nanette, while he watched the

road with the other in the hope of seeing something unusual to break the dreary monotony of his life.

He climbed up to his point of vantage, and found it was as he had thought. While he could see the whole length of the secluded little valley in which the cottage stood, he could also see, on the other side, a long range of hills over which the highway ran, white, and winding like a serpent, until it was lost in a richly wooded plain far in the distance.

Pierre followed its course with longing eyes.

'If one follows that road one comes to Carhaix,' he thought, 'then from Carhaix one can go to St Brieuc, and after that one can go to England. I wonder how long it would take me to walk to St Brieuc?'

Just then his attention was arrested by a couple of cyclists who came spinning along the smooth road. Evidently they were making their way to Londéac, for their faces were set in the other direction from that in which the post-cart went to Carhaix.

The sight of them brought back a flood of the ghost-like memories which always puzzled Pierre. It seemed to him that sometime, long

ago, he too had ridden a bicycle, but he could not remember where or when.

He was puzzling over this, in a dreamy way, when a shout from one of the men made him start, and brought his mind quickly back to the present. Something had plainly happened to the travellers, for they had both dismounted, and one of them had noticed him and was waving to him. Here indeed was a piece of good luck — a great adventure, in fact — for Madame Genviève could not scold him for going down to the road, seeing that the men had called to him.

With a hurried look to see that Nanette was grazing quietly, he slid from the rock on which he had been lying, and ran down the hillside. The strangers were two young Frenchmen, artists from Paris apparently, for they carried paint-boxes and canvas strapped to their bicycles. Their pure Parisian French smacked of the capital. It was lost on Pierre, however, for he only spoke the patois of the district, which is as distinct from French as Welsh is from English.

No words were needed to show what had happened, however. A great broad-headed nail

from a passing peasant's sabot had pierced the back wheel of one of the bicycles, and the tire was flat and useless, every bit of air having escaped. The owner of the bicycle had got out all his appliances for mending the puncture, but had been unable to locate it, and he was looking round in despair for water.

With lively gestures and torrents of voluble French he tried to make Pierre understand what was wanted, and patted him gratefully on the back when the boy led him to a little spring which he had noticed on his way down the hill.

Alas! the first difficulty had been overcome, only to be followed by a second; for how was the water to be conveyed to the roadside?

Taking off his cap, the gentleman tried to use it as a basin, but the water ran through it as if it were a sieve, and with a gesture of despair he shouted to his friend to carry the injured bicycle over the grass to the spring.

'Stop! this will do,' said Pierre suddenly in such good English that the artist started. He had studied art in a London studio, and knew the language fairly well.

'Do you talk English?' he asked in surprise.

But Pierre did not seem to hear the question. He had taken off one of his wooden sabots, and had filled it with water, and, giving it to the gentleman to carry, he proceeded to fill the other also.

'Capital!' said the cyclist. 'Thou art a boy of understanding. True, a sabot doth not hold much water, but there may be enough;' and, shouting to his companion to leave his machine where it was, he proceeded to pick his way carefully over the rough grass, carrying one of the sabots with its precious contents, while Pierre followed behind him with the other.

'Curious that the boy talks English,' he remarked to his companion in his native tongue as they bent over the punctured tire; 'and good English too. I wonder where he picked it up?—Here, my lad,' he went on in the Breton patois, 'where hast thou learned to talk English?'

Pierre hesitated; his life for the last five months had made him strangely suspicious.

'I am an English boy,' he said at last slowly; 'and some day I go to England.'

The strangers glanced at one another. Certainly no one could look less English than

Pierre did at that moment, with his closely cropped head and his blue tunic and trousers.'

'Poor child! his brain is touched,' they whispered; 'he must have picked up the phrases from some travellers. Many English artists come to live in the summer at Pont Aven, down on the way to Quimper. Perhaps he has lived there at some time. It is sad, is it not? And he is such a handsome child if he did not look so ill.'

Poor Pierre! if he had understood what they said he might have tried to talk to them, and tell them of the memories which haunted him. But their French was unintelligible; and, as he gathered from the glances that they stole at him that they were talking about him, he only grew more suspicious, and relapsed into silence, and stood rubbing one foot against the other, pretending not to hear when the strangers plied him with more questions, talking the patois as best they could.

'Ah yes, he is quite silly,' said the man who had spoken to him first, when at last the puncture was mended and he was blowing up his tire. 'It is no use trying to talk to him any more. But doubtless he knows the

value of money—most people do, whether their brains are strong or not; and, after all, he was marvellously quick to understand what I needed.—Here is thy sabot, my child,' he went on, 'and here is something inside it;' and to Pierre's amazement he handed him back his wooden shoe with two bright silver francs inside it.

The look of delight on the little boy's face made both the men laugh. He had not had even a sou in his possession all the time he had been at the cottage. The time when he had had money of his own seemed to belong to the vague, shadowy life—not to the present.

'And here is thy other sabot,' said the second stranger, shaking the water out of it, and handing it back to the boy; and lo! in it also there were two shining silver francs.

Pierre turned a couple of somersaults on the grass. A little Italian boy with a monkey, tramping his way from Cherbourg to sunny Savoy, had called at the cottage one cold April day, and had turned a series of such somersaults on the turf, in the hope of softening Madame Genviève's heart and inducing her to let him sleep beside Nanette all night. Madame Gen-

vièvе had refused his request, but Pierre had seen the somersaults and had practised them in private ever since.

Both the artists laughed heartily at the little amateur acrobat, and then, making signs to him not to lose the money, they mounted their bicycles once more, and rode away, leaving the little blue-clad figure standing motionless by the roadside, staring down at the bright silver coins which he held in his hand. Little they knew what hopes had been raised in the poor little clouded brain by the mere sight of the money, or what a sudden determination Pierre had arrived at.

He would run away. Yes, he would, this very day. Had he not the money now? And with care it would take him to England. He had still half of his sandwich, and that would last quite a long time, so he need not buy very much food. Such a chance might never come again. Had he not the whole of the long afternoon before him before madame would expect him home? And then she would have Nanette to look for, for probably by that time Nanette would have strayed a bit away, and she would have to be found and taken

home before madame had any time to think of him. And then it would grow dark, and she must needs wait until the morning before setting out to go after him. Yes, assuredly this was the opportunity to try to run away, and go to England; and when he got there his head would not feel so queer, and he would remember.

Taking up his sabots, he hesitated for a moment, wondering if he should take them with him or not. He would walk quicker without them, and the sun was very hot, so he decided to leave them. He took them over to the little spring and pressed them down out of sight in the soft mud which surrounded it, and then, glancing all round to see that there was no one within sight, he set off, running as hard as he could along the road, in the direction in which he knew Carhaix lay.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE JOURNEY.

PIERRE went on running as fast as he could until he was quite sure that he was out of sight of the place where he had left Nanette, so that, even if the old woman missed him, and climbed up to the top of the hill where he had been lying when he first saw the two cyclists, she would see nothing of him. Then he brought his pace down to a gentle trot, and then to a walk, for he was sorely out of breath.

Moreover, he had run away on the impulse of a moment, and now that the awful deed was done he felt that he must pause and consider what he should do next.

So by-and-by, after he had been walking and running for more than two hours, and knew that he must at least have put eight kilos between himself and Madame Genviève, he crawled into a little plantation which bordered the road, and burying himself in the

thick undergrowth which formed a delicious shade after the hot, dusty highway and the burning mid-day sun, he lay down, intending only to remain for a short time, and make his plans, as it were, and then, when he was rested, set out again on his walk to Carhaix.

But, as was to be expected, he soon gave up his efforts to think, and, closing his eyes, in five minutes he was fast asleep.

When he awoke the afternoon was nearly gone, and the trees were casting long shadows across the road. He started to his feet in alarm, feeling that he had lost much precious time by his laziness. For by this time the old woman would be expecting Nanette and him to return, and when they did not appear she would set out to look for them, and if Nanette happened to have strayed in the direction of the cottage, instead of away from it, she might discover his absence sooner than he had counted on.

Drawing the belt of his blouse a shade tighter, and pulling his cap well over his eyes, in case he happened to meet any of the few neighbours whom he knew, he climbed over

the fence, and set off once more along the high road at a dogged trot.

But the trot did not last long this time, for he felt strangely tired, and, what was stranger still, he was shivering all over, just as if some one were pouring cold water down his back. He could not understand at all how this should be, for he did not consider, as an older person might have done, that to lie down and go to sleep in a damp, shady wood when one's blood is at fever-heat with running in the sun is a very certain way of getting a chill, if not something worse.

In spite of his tired limbs and aching head, however, he went on doggedly hour after hour, until at last he left the bare hilly country and reached the wooded plain in which he had always imagined Carhaix lay. He was almost dead-beat now, poor little fellow! for he had long since finished the sandwich of black bread, which was all the food he had had that day, and a lump rose in his throat as turn after turn of the road went by, and yet there was no sign of any village.

At last he was fain to sit down by the

roadside and take a drink of water from a little brook which ran by the side of it just at that point.

If only some one would come along, he thought to himself, he would ask them how far he had yet to walk before he reached Carhaix; for surely, now that he had come so far, he was safe from the danger of being recognised. The road which he had travelled had been strangely deserted; he had only met one man and a couple of peasant girls, and they had been going in the opposite direction; but as he was sitting there he heard the rumbling of wheels, and one of the roughly constructed carts of the district came in sight. It contained a huge wooden barrel which completely filled it all but the corners, and its driver, a pleasant-looking young peasant, was sitting in front, his legs dangling over the edge, singing to himself at the top of his voice.

He paused, and drew up his horse with a jerk as Pierre rose from his seat and ran forward with his eager question.

'How far is it to Carhaix?' he repeated. 'It is yet seven kilos, my child. Ah, thou art going there, art thou? Thou lookest more

fit to be going to thy bed at home. What takes a little roundhead like thee to travel the roads alone? Hast friends in Carhaix?'

'I am going to St Brieuc, and then I am going to England. I am an English boy,' said Pierre, the dull look which always came on his face when he tried to think, showing all the more plainly by reason of his utter weariness.

The kindly peasant crossed himself.

'Ah,' he muttered, 'he is one of the good God's Innocents; but all the more reason why I should care for him as far as I can.

'See here, *mon enfant*,' he went on in a louder voice, 'I also go to Carhaix. I have nine little pigs in that barrel, which I go to sell at the market to-morrow. If thou hast a mind thou mayst climb in, if thou canst, behind the barrel, and nestle down among the straw. It is easier to drive than to walk, is it not?'

With grateful thanks, Pierre accepted the welcome offer, and, climbing in at the tail of the cart, he squeezed himself down in one of the corners where the straw was deep, and a couple of sacks afforded him some

shelter from the night air. For although the rays of the sun were strong and fierce through the day, when it set the air was sharp and chilly.

'So thou art an English boy—hey?' said the man good-naturedly, pulling the sacks more comfortably over the little waif whom he had befriended. But Pierre was too utterly worn out to answer him; and, now that the necessity for exertion was over, he lay back in the straw, speechless and exhausted, conscious only of the ever-increasing pain in his head, which the jolting of the cart made almost intolerable.

'Poor little one, he is nearly dead with fatigue!' thought this Good Samaritan. 'I wonder where he has come from, and if he has had any food? Here is a morsel of sausage and a roll left, and a mouthful of red wine at the bottom of my flagon. My Marie, bless her heart! is always afraid that I starve before I reach Carhaix.—Here, my child, take a drink of this,' and he stretched over and put the mouth of the flagon to Pierre's parched lips.

It was but the red wine of the country, poor and thin and sour, but it revived the

weary little traveller wonderfully, and by the time he had eaten the roll of bread and the bit of sausage he felt much stronger, and the pain in his head was not quite so bad as it was before.

'I come from the mountains. I am going to England. I am an English boy.' This was all the information the honest countryman could glean from him, although he plied him with questions until the roofs of Carhaix came in sight, a gray, uninteresting-looking place, composed of concrete houses built round a square.

'But to go to England thou must go to St Brieuc, and thence to St Malo,' said the man, 'and it is a long, long way, nigh fifty kilos.'

'But I can walk; I am strong,' said Pierre hopefully; 'and perhaps some one else will give me a ride as thou hast done. And I have money. See here!' and, with a confiding look he drew out of his pocket the four shining francs. 'See. I will give thee one for the ride,' he said, holding one out in his hand.

'The good God forbid,' said the man. 'Nay, nay; keep thy money, my child. Thou wilt

need it all. For when thou arrivest at St Malo thou wilt need some to give to the man on the steamer, if so be thou art really going to England. Put it away again, deep down in thy pocket, and let it not be seen by every man. Else wilt thou be robbed, and what will follow then, eh?'

By this time the cart had rumbled into the square, and driven through an archway into the courtyard of a little inn which stood somewhat back from the rest of the houses. The man got down, and so did Pierre. His legs were aching worse than ever now, and oh, how he wished that he might spend the night among the straw, instead of having to go and look for a sleeping-place! Indeed, he hardly knew how to go and look for one, for it had never entered into his calculations that he would need to spend a night on the road.

Perhaps the man saw the wistful look in his eyes, for after he had called to the landlord of the inn, and with his help had lifted down the great round tub-like barrel, with its living burden, and had carried it carefully into a small outhouse, where, appar-

He sank gratefully into the soft bed of straw which the kind countryman made up for him, and had fallen into a feverish sleep.

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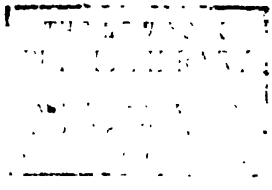

ently it was to remain during the night, and had seen his old gray horse safely tied up in one of the stalls in the stable, he turned to the little boy, who was still lingering near the archway.

'Wouldst like a night's lodging, little one?' he said. 'For if so, I could let thee lie in the same house as my piglets. I pay a few sous for the use of the outhouse; the owner of the inn is a cousin of my wife's, and he lets me have it cheaply. I can put what I like in it, and I take the key, so, if thou wilt, I can take the straw from the cart and spread it down in a corner, and thou canst sleep there as safely and at less cost than if thou went somewhere and paid for a bed.'

Needless to say, Pierre agreed to this offer gladly. He was feeling so tired and ill that he would have been content to lie down in the open street, and he sank gratefully into the soft bed of straw which the kind countryman made up for him, and had fallen into a feverish sleep long before the little piglets had finished their supper of oatmeal and milk.

Nor did the good man's kindness stop there. In the gray dusk of the morning he was

back again, his honest face beaming with excitement. He stooped down and roused the sleeping boy. 'See here, *mon enfant*,' he whispered, 'there is a chance, an unexpected chance, for thee to travel to St Malo—to Dinard, at least, and, once there, St Malo is just across the mouth of the river. Late last night one of these new-fashioned machines arrived—automobiles they call them. There is no one travelling in it but the driver; he is in the employment of a rich Vicomte who lives near St Malo. The car is a new one, and he has been sent to bring it home from the makers; so much he told last night to Jean Coudart, my wife's cousin. And I sat, and I smoked, and I listened. Now, said I to myself, here is a chance, if the good God wills, for my little friend who desires to go to England. And before I went to rest I slipped out into the courtyard, on pretence of visiting my piglets, and I visited the car instead, and I found that it is a large one, with a great deep part behind, all covered over with tarpaulin, and underneath the tarpaulin are some soft rugs and other bundles which the man is carrying with him. So it

seems to me that if thou wert to rise now, and hide in the car under the tarpaulin, thou wilt have an easy journey to Dinard; and when thou arrivest, if thou art quick, and slippest out when the driver is not looking, he need never know, and it will be all the same.'

Half-asleep and half-dazed, Pierre jumped up and followed his friend, hardly understanding all the plan, and yet understanding enough to know that if it were successful he would soon be quite out of reach of pursuit, the fear of which had dogged his broken slumbers all night.

Swiftly and noiselessly the man undid one of the cords that fastened down the tarpaulin cover, and, lifting one corner of it, he helped Pierre to climb up on the soft tired wheel, and crawl under it, and drop down into the deep well of the car, which was shaped something like a wagonette. The space between the seats was almost filled with soft rolls of cloth, horse-wraps they seemed to be; but Pierre managed to squeeze in among them, and, with the man's help, to make himself a very comfortable little nest.

'That is good,' whispered the peasant triumphantly. 'Thou wilt lie there as comfortably as my little piglets in their tub, and the good God, I doubt not, will find a way for thee to creep out unobserved when thou reachest Dinard. Thou must trust to thy brains to know when thou hast arrived there. And see, I have remembered thy breakfast and thy dinner. Catch,' and he tossed down a parcel of bread and cheese into Pierre's lap. 'Now, little one,' he said 'I must shut thee up, and say adieu, and wish thee a good voyage; and if ever thou passest through the mountains again, do not forget to ask for Baptiste Guinaud and his wife Marie.—The saints preserve him!' he said to himself as he fastened down the tarpaulin cover once more, and turned in the direction of the outhouse. 'I scarce know if I have done right in letting him go. But he is one of God's Innocents, and Monsieur the Curé says that for such there is special protection. I love not the reports I hear of the institution at Châteauneuf for such as he. They were none too kind to my cousin's grandmother when she had the misfortune to require to be taken there. And if

the lad be English, as he says he is, they will know better what to do with him in Dinard or St Malo, where there are many English people, than a poor man like me. Anyhow, the good God guard him! say I, and I know that Marie would say the same if she were here.'

CHAPTER XX.

MONSIEUR THE VICOMTE DE CHOISIGNY.

IT was just after lunch, and Monsieur the Vicomte de Choisigny had drunk his coffee, which in summer was always carried out to a table in a vine-covered arbour, just by the window of the great salon, and was walking up and down the terrace, carrying on an animated discussion with a friend of his.

The Vicomte was a dark-haired, lively little Frenchman, who, all the time he was talking, shrugged his shoulders and made signs with his fingers as if he found that his tongue alone could not express all he meant it to express.

The man who walked beside him, his arm linked in his, was utterly unlike him. From his dress one could see at once that he was a clergyman, and from an indescribable something in his whole appearance one could also tell that he was an Englishman. He was tall and slight, with iron-gray hair, and a clean-shaven, delicate face, which, however, was

shrewd and kindly, but which seemed to tell a tale of strenuous and trying work.

No two men could have presented a greater contrast to each other, and yet the two were bosom friends. They had been at Oxford together, for Arnauld de Choisigny was a Protestant, a descendant of an old Huguenot family, and his father had wished him to be educated at an English university, so they had played in the same cricket matches and pulled in the same boat; and although their ways in life had lain far apart the old friendship still existed as close and true as ever.

No one looking at them would have judged them to be contemporaries in age, for the years that had been spent by Nigel Maxwell in fighting with the sin and misery of an East London parish, and that had broken down his health for a time, and made his hair whiter than it need have been, had passed lightly over the Vicomte, who, nevertheless, had done his duty nobly in his own way, and was known by all the peasants on his large estates as a model landlord and a kind and just master.

'Yes, my friend,' he was saying in perfect

English, 'I am glad for your sake that the Bishop has insisted on filling up your place in Bethnal Green, and is sending you down to rusticate for a year or two in that sea-side parish in Cornwall. He is a wise man your Bishop, and knows what he is doing. In a year or two you will be as strong and well as ever you were, and fit to take up work in the city again if you still wish to do so. And for the present, a couple of months' idleness at the Château de Choisigny will do you no end of good before you take up your new work of preaching to the fisherfolks!'

Nigel Maxwell smiled, and shook his head with a sigh. No one but himself knew what a trial this enforced idleness was, or what a wrench it had been to him to leave his London parish and the poor people there who had learned to love and trust him, and whose lives had been brighter and better because of his presence among them.

'You know how I am enjoying my visit, Arnauld,' he said. 'I have not seen so much of you since the old Oxford days. Indeed, I have never had such a lazy time since then;

but I have run too long in harness to take kindly to an idle life, so you must excuse me if sometimes I seem a little restless.'

The Vicomte shrugged his shoulders and laughed a good-natured, cheerful laugh.

'Thou wilt learn, *mon ami;* thou wilt learn,' he said. 'Already I begin to see in you traces of an idleness which I would not have suspected a month ago. For instance, I noted that you did not open a book this whole morning, but sat and smoked, with your hands folded. The veriest loafer in the world could not have been worse.'

'It was the lovely scenery that tempted me,' replied his friend. 'If there was one thing I used to long for in Bethnal Green it was to see green fields and a blue sky, undimmed and unclouded by dirt or smoke.'

'Ah, if it is scenery you want, wait until the new auto comes,' said his companion. 'Then I shall take you about, and let you see my country. What say you to a run through Brittany and down the Loire? We need not go too quickly; we could rest where we liked.'

Just then a servant came along the terrace. It was evident that he had some news to tell,

for ill-concealed eagerness was written on his face, and he was hurrying as much as was compatible with the dignity of a well-trained servant.

'Ha, Jacques!' said the Vicomte, turning to him and speaking in rapid French, 'hast thou come to tell us that the car has come? If it left Carhaix, as it ought to have done, this morning, it has had plenty of time to have arrived by now.'

The man bowed respectfully.

'But yes, sire,' he answered, 'it has even now arrived. It is in the courtyard. I was hurrying to inform you when Jean-Marie called me back. He had begun to undo the wrappings, and he had made a most extraordinary discovery—a discovery both strange and startling. In the car, in the back of it, among the rugs which your honour ordered Jean-Marie to bring with him from Nantes, was a child, a little boy. The poor child seems ill; his head is gone. In short, sire, he raves; and Jean-Marie called out to me, "Go, Jacques, go quickly, and call the Vicomte; he will know what to do." So I came, sire, as quickly as I could.'

'So we see,' said the Vicomte laughing. 'Thou

wert always one who loved a mystery, Jacques. Doubtless it is some little garçon who wanted a cheap ride and who now feigns illness as an excuse for his deed. But go—we will follow—and frighten the little rogue well.'

But one glance at the tiny huddled-up figure, with its flushed face and wild, unseeing eyes, showed the Vicomte that this was no case of imposture. Whatever had been the boy's reason for concealment, whatever had been his state when he crept under the tarpaulin cover, it was evident that now he was very ill.

'Poor little fellow! Hast thou any idea where thou pickedest him up, Jean-Marie, or how long he hath lain under that heavy covering? It may be a case of sunstroke; the heat must have been terrible.'

But Jean-Marie, who was standing in the middle of a group of his fellow-servants, gazing in amazement at the strange little passenger whom he had so unwittingly carried in his master's new car, shook his head stupidly.

'That I cannot tell, sire,' he answered. 'He could not be there when I left Nantes, because I put in the rugs and fastened up the tarpaulin just before I started; and he can scarce have

got in at Dinard, the distance is too short. Mayhap he crawled in at Carhaix, for he looks like a little peasant from the mountains of Bretagne. But how he pulled down the cover over himself, and fastened it so carefully—that is what I cannot understand, sire.'

'He is dressed like a little peasant; but I hardly think he is,' said Mr Maxwell, who had been examining the little stowaway carefully. 'It seems to me, Arnauld, that there is more here than meets the eye. Just listen to what he says, and his accent is as pure as mine.'

'I am an English boy, an English boy,' moaned Pierre, in a low monotonous voice, as if he were repeating a lesson, 'and I am going to England. I have forgotten much, my head always feels queer; but I am going to England, and then I will remember.'

These broken sentences were repeated over and over again, and then the weak voice wandered off into a jumble of words, at the sound of which the clergyman shook his head.

'That is not French,' he said. 'Who or what can he be, I wonder?'

'It is the Breton patois,' said the Vicomte; 'I understand it, for old Suzette my foster-

mother—my housekeeper now—came from the mountains, and I learned the language ere I could speak my own. He is talking now like any peasant child about cows, and pigs, and other animals; and, look, he shrinks from something as if he expected a blow. But we must do something; we cannot let him lie here.—Go, Jacques, and call Suzette; she is a good nurse, and she will know what to do.'

Mr Maxwell had already lifted the little waif in his arms, however.

'With your leave, Arnauld,' he said, 'I will carry him up to my room. It is big enough for me and half-a-dozen sick children if necessary. It is not the first time by any means that I have tried my hand at nursing, and it will make me feel that I am not quite a cumberer of the ground. Perhaps you will allow old Suzette to come to my help with some fresh tepid water. If we had him out of the sun, and some of this dust washed away, perhaps the little lad may revive. I confess I shall be deeply interested to hear his story.'

But all that the kind clergyman, aided by old Suzette, who came in in her quaint peasant costume, eager to lend her aid, could do, could

not bring back sense to poor little Pierre's wandering brain. They hoped that it would do so, for after they had undressed him, and sponged him tenderly all over with vinegar and water, and laid him in Mr Maxwell's own bed, which they drew to the open window, so that he should have as much of the air as it was possible to get on that sultry afternoon, he fell into a heavy sleep; but when he awoke he seemed more feverish than ever, and tossed from side to side, throwing off the spotless coverings which Suzette would fain have kept tucked neatly round him, and talked brokenly in English of how he was an English boy, and must get up and go home.'

CHAPTER XXI.

THE OPINION OF DR JULES.

'TIENS!' said old Monsieur Croite, the family doctor and trusted friend of the Choisigny family, who had been hastily summoned from Dinard, and who stood looking down at his little patient, with Mr Maxwell and the Vicomte at his elbow. 'At the first there has been a chill, a most severe one, and that has brought on a slight attack of rheumatic fever. Not bad, that is to say, but still it is there. And on the top of that, as it were, there are signs of irritability of the brain. That may arise from one thing, or it may arise from another. The lad may have been ill-treated, or he may have been frightened, which after all is but another form of ill-treatment, or he may be of weak intellect. That I cannot say for certain, but I suspect much. See! And laying his hand on Pierre's little closely cropped head, he parted the hair just above the right ear, and showed an ugly scar which looked as if it were only newly healed.

'I do not know,' he repeated; 'but I suspect that the boy has had a blow, and that the skull has been fractured, not badly, but a little, and that the skull presses on the brain. I am no surgeon; I leave that to those who are more skilful in that branch of our profession than I am. But by your leave, Monsieur the Vicomte, I will return to-morrow with my son; he, as you know, has just returned from work in the hospitals of Vienna and Paris. He has had the experience. He shall tell us what he thinks.'

So next morning Dr Croite brought his tall, grave son with him to the château, and together they made a careful examination of the unconscious child.

'It is as my father says, monsieur,' said Dr Jules gravely, when the patient had been left in Suzette's hands, and all four gentlemen had assembled downstairs in the Vicomte's private room. 'The boy has had an injury to his head, inflicted by some one, I should say, rather than by a fall. It must have occurred within the last six months, the condition of the wound tells me that, and there is something—a tiny splinter of bone mayhap—which presses on the brain. Had this been all, I would have operated

at once, and removed the cause of the pressure, whatever it may be. Such operations are dangerous, but in a large hospital they are done every day. But in the boy's present condition I dare not attempt it; it would mean certain failure. If with careful nursing you can subdue the fever, and maintain his strength, which I very much doubt, for he is very weak, poor little one! then in three weeks or a month it might be attempted.'

'If Monsieur the Vicomte desires it, I can have him removed to the little hospital at Dinard,' broke in the old doctor. 'Such nursing as this must be puts a household to great inconvenience, and the good Sisters at the hospital are very kind.'

'The boy is very weak,' remarked his son suggestively; 'he has suffered great hardships.'

'Eh, what?' said the Vicomte, suddenly recognising the drift of the conversation. 'But he cannot be removed from here. Old Suzette is a splendid nurse. She nursed me through all my childhood's ailments; and these were not few, as you, Monsieur Croite, know. And if there has to be any operation, Monsieur Jules, you must just bring one of the good Sisters

up from the hospital to help you. It shall never be said that Arnauld de Choisigny turned any sick thing, even if it be only a poor wandering child, from his house.'

'I was not suggesting that, monsieur,' said Dr Jules humbly; 'but the case is very critical. The child may die, to put it plainly, and it will cause you a great deal of trouble. He must be watched night and day if he has to have a chance.'

'I will watch him,' said Mr Maxwell, 'and the Vicomte and old Suzette will help me. If, as I suspect,' he went on, with flashing eyes, 'the child is really English, then there has been grave wickedness done somewhere; but, please God, we will pull him through and put it right.'

Faithfully did the three Good Samaritans into whose hands Pierre had fallen carry out their self-imposed task.

To Mr Maxwell, whose life had been one long fight against sin, with its accompaniments disease and death, it was simply a piece of the day's work, a duty that had fallen to his hands, an opportunity for service; and had it not been for the Vicomte, who insisted that he should go out for a daily walk, and have

his proper hours for sleep, he would have spent every minute in the sick-room, watching beside the unconscious boy, as he had often watched beside the bed of some little street arab in some wretched den in the slums of his city parish.

When, to please his friend, he would go out for a walk up and down the terrace, or go down to the little landing-stage for a row on the river, the Vicomte was always ready to take his place, or old Suzette, who was a born nurse, and who sat up all night and was quite ready to sit up all day too if need be. Indeed, they let her be beside Pierre as much as possible, for when she talked to him and soothed him in her homely patois he seemed quieter and less excited than when Mr Maxwell was by his bedside. One would have thought then that he knew that he was in the presence of an Englishman, for he would stop his low rambling Breton talk and turn to English phrases, and grow so hot and eager that the good clergyman had often to slip out of the room, and let Suzette take his place in the big arm-chair at the head of Pierre's bed.

For three long weeks this went on, and

often it seemed that the little waif would drift out of life without being able to give the slightest clue to his identity. But at last the fever subsided, and one sunny morning, early in June, Dr Croite came from Dinard, accompanied by his son and another doctor, and a blue-robed Sister from the hospital, and with great care they performed the operation which Dr Jules had called trepanning; while out on the terrace the Vicomte and Mr Maxwell paced silently up and down, making no effort to conceal their great anxiety, and old Suzette knelt in her own little turret chamber at the top of the château, and prayed with simple fervour over her beads.

For, in spite of the fact that he had not spoken one sensible sentence to them since the moment when he had been discovered in the car, they had all grown to love the little fellow, with his pathetic brown eyes and gentle ways, which, shown as they were unconsciously, made his nurses all the surer that he was no mere peasant-boy.

At last the great glass doors which separated the hall of the château from the terrace opened, and the doctors came out.

'Well, how is it? Will he live?' eagerly asked the two men who had waited for them with so much impatience.

'It seems so; everything points to it,' replied Dr Jules, proud in the consciousness of appearing as a fully fledged surgeon before the Vicomte, who had known him ever since he was a little lad in blue blouses, who used to drive up in his father's gig to the gates of the château, and wait under the lime-trees with Gustave the coachman and the old brown horse while his father, paying his daily visit, walked up the short avenue on foot, and vanished through the great doors, which to little Jules, gazing after him, seemed like the entrance of an enchanted palace.

The old Vicomte was alive then, though he was on his deathbed, and the young Seigneur, Monsieur Arnauld, would walk slowly back with Dr Croite to where his gig stood, discussing his father's illness with him, and would notice the little blue-bloused boy, and pat him on the head, and ask his name, and go into the orchard and fetch him an apple.

All that seemed very far away to Dr Jules nowadays, though it seemed but yesterday to

the simpler Vicomte; and he liked to have the opportunity to show the older man that he had grown up, and had taken his place in the world, and was no more a mere country youth, but a learned young doctor, whose name was well known among men of science.

'The operation has been very successful,' he went on, with a touch of importance in his tone, while his father and the other doctor nodded their heads to show that they agreed with him. 'It is just as I—as we—thought. There had been a hurt, a blow most likely, and a splinter of the skull was pressing on the brain. That caused the loss of memory, the want of intellect as it were. That ought to be gone now, and when he awakes he ought to be as alive to everything that passes as any one else. Only, I would advise,' and here he held up his hand, and blinked solemnly through his spectacles in a way that brought a twinkle to Mr Maxwell's gray eyes, and made him look ten years younger for the moment, 'that for the first six days or so he be left entirely to the good Sister and to the old serving-woman Suzette. They will talk to him in the Breton tongue so long as he is

weak, and he will not be so apt to remember or to ask questions. Whatever his past history may have been, we must try to give his brain as much rest as possible before it is troubled by his beginning to think.'

To which advice, in spite of his amusement at Dr Jules's manner, Mr Maxwell heartily agreed.

CHAPTER XXII.

MR MAXWELL FINDS OUT THE TRUTH.

'WELL, my friend, and what hast thou found out?'

It was the Vicomte who spoke, and the question was addressed to Mr Maxwell, who had just come down from Pierre's room with a puzzled look on his face.

Ten days had passed since the operation, and the boy was recovering rapidly. At his last visit, Dr Jules had pronounced him out of danger, and had predicted that he would be able to be outside in a fortnight; and he had added, 'There is now no reason why monsieur may not see him, and try to learn something about his history, if only monsieur is careful not to press things too far. Let everything come naturally, just as the boy seems inclined to talk about the past.'

The good clergyman had eagerly availed himself of the permission, and had gone twice to Pierre's room—hoping to hear what strange chance had brought him to the château dis-

guised as a Breton peasant, for, from certain things he had said to Sister Lucie, there was no doubt whatever that he was not French—but each time he had returned grievously disappointed.

Pierre answered his inquiries as to his health and comfort in perfect English, and would talk freely about any little incident which had happened in his sick-room; but when Mr Maxwell tried to lead the conversation back to the past, and to find out carefully how much the little boy remembered, he grew flushed and restless, and relapsed into an uneasy silence, and the anxious listener was too good a nurse to disobey the doctor's orders and press the matter, although he grew more and more puzzled as he saw that Pierre certainly remembered more than he was willing to talk about.

'I am completely puzzled, Arnauld,' he said, in answer to the Vicomte's question. 'The boy is English, so much I know; he has owned to that. But who he is, or how he came here, is a mystery, and it is a mystery that for some reason he is unwilling to clear up. As yet he is too weak for it to be safe for me to force matters. He seems to be so suspicious

of my questions, and to be always on his guard, and yet I see such a longing look in his big brown eyes. Ah well! we must have patience. Perhaps when he knows me better he will confide in me of his own accord. I shall make no attempt, for the present at least, to find out his secret.'

So the wise man waited patiently, determined to win the little boy's confidence by kindness and not by force, trying in the meantime to make the tedious time of convalescence as easy as possible, by reading to him, and playing simple games with him, and talking as if Pierre's life had only begun with his illness, and all his past life had been one long blank.

But all the time he was watching and waiting, and when occasionally, at night, he heard a restless movement in the little bed, that had been placed so close to his that he could stretch out his hand to make a position easier or turn a hot pillow, or heard a stifled sob, he knew that sooner or later the strange reserve would break down, and the story, whatever it was, be told. So he watched and waited, and at last his patience was rewarded.

It had been a glorious summer day, and

Pierre had been well enough to be carried down and laid on a couch under a great lime-tree, where he could see the river, and watch the boats with their loads of gaily attired holiday-makers gliding up or down, on their way to Dinan or St Malo.

It was all so bright and sunny, such a change from the darkened sick-room in which he had lain for so many weeks, that he felt almost well again, and chatted away quite brightly to the Vicomte, who spent most of the day at his side, for the post had brought Mr Maxwell some important letters which had caused him to go into St Malo after *déjeuner*.

But as evening came on, one of the subtle changes which come so quickly to any one who is recovering from a severe illness fell over the little boy. He grew tired and listless, and could hardly touch the glass of warm milk which old Suzette carried out to him on a dainty tray.

'You are tired, my boy,' said Mr Maxwell, who had just returned. 'Remember, you have made a great step in advance to-day, so you must not wonder if you are ready for bed an hour earlier than usual.'

Pierre shook his head.

'I am not so very tired, sir,' he said slowly; 'but—but—I was thinking that I will soon be well again.'

'And that ought to make you feel very thankful,' said Mr Maxwell cheerfully, although Pierre's words, and the hopeless tone in which they were spoken, made him wonder more than ever what the mystery was which surrounded the little waif who had been so suddenly thrown on his care.

'But we will not stop to moralise to-night,' he went on, stooping down and lifting Pierre gently in his arms, 'for *I* know that you are tired, if you don't, and the best place for tired boys is bed. You will see how much brighter you will feel in the morning.'

He did not say any more, but when the little boy was safely in bed, and he took up his Bible to read a few verses aloud, as he had always done since Pierre was well enough to listen, he hesitated, and turned over the leaves slowly. At last he began to read softly, in the dim light, the beautiful old story of the son who went into the far country, and of the father who was waiting so tenderly to

welcome him, when as yet he was a long way off, but when his face was once more turned towards home.

When it was finished he rose, and, crossing the room, he stooped down to give Pierre his customary good-night kiss; but the little face was buried in the pillow, and he could feel that the boy was shaking from head to foot in his endeavours to keep back the sobs.

'This will never do,' he thought to himself; 'this will throw him back for days. It is better to have it out, even at the risk of a lecture from Dr Jules.'

So, seating himself on the bed, he put his arm very tenderly round the little huddled-up figure, and drew it towards him.

'My child,' he said softly, 'can you not trust me? Would it not be better to tell me everything, instead of hiding it up in your own heart? Besides, though I do not know everything about you, I think I know a good deal. Nay, I have not been prying,' he went on, as he felt the little boy start at his words; 'but you know I have been accustomed to meet all sorts of people in my work, and to hear all sorts of stories, very sad ones most of them,

and one learns to read between the lines. For instance, I know that you are an English boy and a gentleman's son—your voice and manners tell me that; and am almost certain that your name is not Pierre. I am almost certain, too, that you have got into some trouble—done something wrong, perhaps—and you are just like the son in the story, you are thinking of home, and your father there, or perhaps your mother; only it seems so difficult to go back that you have almost lost heart.'

'It's mother. Father knows,' gasped Pierre between his sobs. 'But I've been thinking all this time, since I could remember, that perhaps it would be better if I were always Pierre. I could go away and work, when I am better. The Vicomte might give me something to do, and you know I learned to work with Madame Genviève. For they must have lost me since Christmas time, and perhaps mother thinks that I am dead, and it would be better for them all, Ronald and Dorothy too, if they thought so always. For I've been a thief and a liar; and, although Isobel didn't die, I'm sure mother's heart must be broken. Besides, Ronald is going to school next year, and all the other

boys would get to know what sort of brother he has.'

'Poor little chap!' said Mr Maxwell—who had been able to pick out Vivian's story pretty accurately from his confused sentences—lifting him into a more comfortable position, and stroking his bandaged head; 'so you think that lives are ruined at eleven years old, and that mothers feel like that? Why, I hope that you have many years to live yet—many years in which to undo the past; and as for your mother, my boy, I think she is far more likely to be breaking her heart because she does not know where you are or what has happened to you. But tell me all about it, from the very beginning, and then I will try to help you to do what is right. You need not be afraid that it will make any difference to me; my lads at Bethnal Green always came to me in their troubles.'

So Pierre told all the long story which had seemed so perplexing and confused during the months that he had lived with Madame Geneviève, but which had pieced itself together in his mind and become clear and distinct since the operation.

'I can understand it all, sir,' he said when he had finished, 'except what happened at the station. I do not see what the gentleman with the bag had to do with the man with the green patch over his eye, whom I saw in the summer-house, or how I could be so stupid as to jump out of the cab and run after him when father told me to stay in it till he came back. And I don't see why the gentleman wanted to take me with him in the train, even although he must have thought me very rude to run after him like that, saying that I knew him. Do you think that I was beginning to be ill then? For I remember saying that I would call a policeman, and I meant to do so. I saw one along the platform. It was when I turned to go for him that one of the gentlemen pulled me into the carriage. Do you think that my head must have been getting queer then? I almost think that it must.'

'No, your head was not queer. It was quite clear and sensible, and you were a brave little fellow, Vivian,' replied Mr Maxwell, a curious light coming into his keen gray eyes, 'for the man in the summer-house was the same person as the gentleman on the platform, and he and

his friends were on their way to France. Probably they had a great deal of your aunt's silver hidden about them, and if you had been able to get a policeman soon enough they would have been arrested; so the scoundrels preferred to carry you off with them, and to knock you on the head when you were likely to prove troublesome. Oh, I see it all, and so will the men at Scotland Yard when they hear the story; and, please God, the rascals will get their deserts. But you must not talk any more to-night, my boy; you will go to sleep quietly now, and we will discuss it in the morning. And as for your father and mother, why, when they hear everything, I think they will be quite proud of you. For, you know, Vivian, after all, you had owned up before all this happened.'

The little fellow's face brightened as he heard his long-lost name again.

'I feel as if I wanted mother dreadfully, all of a sudden,' he said, as he nestled down drowsily among the pillows. 'How long will it take her to come?'

Mr Maxwell smiled to himself at the question, which showed how strong, after all, was the

childish faith in the mother-love which would forgive so much, and be so ready to start out at once to meet the little prodigal.

Ten minutes later, when he had satisfied himself that Vivian was sleeping peacefully, he went downstairs to the Vicomte, a slip of paper in his hand on which was written an address, and in other ten minutes the two friends were speeding away to Dinard as fast as the new motor-car could take them, in order to send away two telegrams, one of which was a message of good tidings to an English home, and the other an urgent summons to an officer at Scotland Yard.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A HAPPY MEETING.

THE whole of the next day Vivian lay under the lime-tree, hardly speaking at all, a look of happy expectancy on his face. All his dread of meeting his parents seemed to have vanished, and in spite of Mr Maxwell's assurances that Mrs Armitage could not possibly arrive that night, even if she were at home and able to start the moment she received the telegram, he pleaded to be allowed to remain up an hour later than usual, and only consented to go to bed when his eyes were growing so heavy that he could hardly keep them open.

Perhaps this was the reason why he was not disturbed by the bustle of an arrival early next morning, although the window of his bedroom looked straight down into the courtyard; and why he did not wake when his bedroom door was gently opened, and some one entered the room and sat down in the great arm-chair at the head of his bed.

It was quite half-an-hour afterwards when he opened his eyes, and fixed them in a half-wondering way on the sweet face that was bent down over his.

'Mother, oh mother!' he cried, throwing up a pair of thin arms and clasping them round his mother's neck as if he would never let her go again. 'Can you forgive me? I am so sorry—so terribly sorry.'

'Yes, indeed, I can,' said Mrs Armitage in a broken voice, pressing her lips to the little face which she had given up all hopes of ever seeing again. 'God has been very good to us, Vivi, in giving you back; and we will begin all over again, dearie, and forget all that has passed.'

For a moment there was silence, mother and son clinging to each other in a happiness that was too deep for words.

Then Vivian spoke again.

'And Aunt Dora and Uncle Walter,' he asked rather anxiously, 'will they ever speak to me again? And how is Isobel? And what about Joe Flinders?'

'Isobel is almost well again,' answered Mrs Armitage cheerfully, determined that after the

'Mother, oh mother!' he cried. . . . 'Can you forgive me?'

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first natural emotion there should be nothing but gladness in the meeting, and that the little prodigal who had suffered so much and repented so deeply should feel that there was nothing but rejoicing at his return. 'She is still lying on her chair, but she is to be allowed to walk about next month when they go to the seaside.'

'On her chair! Has she been lying on a chair all this time?' asked Vivian in surprise, his radiant face growing grave with the sense of this new calamity.

'Ah, it will take you quite a long time to pick up the threads of family life again,' laughed his mother; 'but do not look so distressed. Isobel is quite happy, and is really almost well; and as for Uncle Walter and Aunt Dora—well, look here—here is a telegram which they have sent all this way to you, just to let you know how glad they are that we have found you again.'

Tears came into Vivian's eyes as his mother held up the flimsy paper and he read the kind words which it contained for himself.

'Every one is too good to me, mother,' he said, his lips quivering; 'I don't deserve it. It

is just like the Bible story—the ring, and the best dress; and yet all the time Mr Maxwell was reading it to me the other night I felt that it could not turn out the same for me, and I was afraid to tell him my proper name. He has been so good to me, mother; he made me feel that I must tell him, even though I was afraid, for he began talking about you, and saying that you might be breaking your heart because you had lost me. Somehow I had never thought about that before; I had only thought of the trouble and the disgrace I had been to you all. And yet it is true what he said. You are just as kind and jolly as ever, just as if I hadn't done anything.'

His mother kissed him softly.

'And remember, dearie,' she whispered, 'if it is true of mother and father, it is far more true of God, and of the dear Lord who first told the story as an example of what love and forgiveness really are. But we must not have any more serious talk just now. Why, you have never asked for father, or Ronald, or little Dorothy!'

'Oh yes, how are they?' asked Vivian eagerly, looking half-ashamed of his omission.

'And Joe Flinders,' he repeated anxiously, 'how is he?'

'Joe is very well indeed,' replied his mother, seeing that it would ease his mind to have this sore subject spoken of. 'But he is not with Uncle Walter now; he has got a place as groom-gardener at a country rectory in Dorsetshire, and his mother has gone with him to keep the lodge and look after the hens. Joe is quite elated, I can tell you; his wages are almost double what he had at Eversley, and we hear such good reports of him! As for Dorothy, she is blooming; she sent a hundred kisses to you, and would have sent her own special dolly Rose-Marie if I had had room for her in my bag. As for father and Ronald, they must speak for themselves, for I hear them coming upstairs.'

'Father and Ronald! Have they come all this way to see me?' asked Vivian, his eyes wide open with astonishment.

His mother had no time to answer before the door was thrown open, and the smiling faces of his father and brother were beaming down at him.

Ronald's smile was rather misty, to be sure,

in spite of the warning Dr Armitage had given him about not breaking down or exciting Vivian, and his 'Hallo, old chap!' sounded rather choked; but what did it matter to Vivian, who pulled the dear curly head down on the pillow beside him, feeling that he could face the world again now that he had all his dear ones with him, and they had forgiven him freely!

They all talked for a little time, and then his mother cleared the room, and insisted that he should lie still and rest quietly for an hour after all the excitement which he had passed through, while she sat beside him in happy silence, holding his hand in hers.

Then she helped him to dress, and his father came and carried him out to his usual place under the lime-tree, where he spent a long happy morning, talking to his mother and Ronald, listening to all that they had to tell him of the events of the last six months, and pouring out his own story about the little cottage away in the *Montagnes Noirs*, and old Madame Genviève, and the gentle Nanette (of whom he had been really fond), and the kind peasant who had acted the Good Samaritan to

him, and who had so unwittingly led him to safe shelter by suggesting that he should travel hidden in the Vicomte's motor-car.

'Father must find him out and give him something, mother,' he said; 'for if it had not been for him I would never have come here. Indeed, I think I would have turned ill by the roadside, for I can just remember how my legs ached and how funny my head felt. As for Madame Geneviève, I don't want ever to see her again,' and he gave a little shudder as he remembered the dark days he had spent with her.

'No, you need never see her again, my boy,' said his mother, 'and I think the best thing you can do is to put all thoughts of her out of your head.'

She did not add that although Vivian would not see the unkind old woman again, unless he had to go into the witness-box and witness against her, other people would make a point of finding her out, and making her explain how it was that Vivian came to live with her; for, after discussing the matter, the Vicomte and Mr Maxwell and Dr Armitage had all agreed that there was little doubt that she

was in league with her son who had brought Vivian to the cottage, and who in his turn was doubtless in league with the gang of burglars who had broken into Eversley with such disastrous results.

The three gentlemen had gone to Dinard to meet the detective whom the Vicomte had telegraphed for; but Vivian was not told this, as it was thought better not to excite him more than could be helped; and when at last they returned in time for afternoon-tea (which the Vicomte had ordered out of courtesy to Mrs Armitage), bringing a stout, rosy-cheeked little man with them, who spoke French and English equally well, and who looked exactly like a farmer, it was quite a long time before the little boy grasped the fact that the stranger who listened so attentively, and seemed so interested in all his adventures, was really one of the cleverest detectives in Europe.

'Bravo!' he said at last, when, almost unknown to Vivian, the whole story had been drawn forth once more. 'You are a very plucky fellow, Master Vivian, for I fancy that few grown men would have dared to tackle Jim Strivers as you did. Why, he is one of

the best-known burglars in England, and a most dangerous man. It was a desperate step, even for him, to smuggle you into a carriage, and to tap you on the head to keep you still. I wonder they did not discover you at the Custom-House. One of them carried you like a baby, I dare say. However, he will find he has gone just one step too far this time. We will get rid of him for ten or fifteen years.'

'Do you know his name?' asked Vivian in surprise.

'Yes, I do, now that you have described him to me,' said the man, laughing. 'I have a very large acquaintanceship with people of that kind, young sir; if I showed you my visiting-list you would be astonished. I wonder none of us thought of Jim before; but we didn't know that he was in London just then, and his giving us the slip, and getting across to Paris like that, threw us off the scent.—However, I'll be off to Paris as soon as is convenient to you, monsieur,' and he bowed to the Vicomte. 'There is no time to be lost if we want to catch the whole gang. For, now that the young gentleman has escaped, the old woman may give the alarm, though we will hope that

she is in too great fear of her son to let him know a moment sooner than she could help.—I don't expect she could write. Could she?' he went on, turning sharply to Vivian.

'I don't know; I never saw her try,' said Vivian doubtfully.

'I do not expect she could,' said the detective; 'the stupider she is, the safer for the gang. I shouldn't be a bit astonished if they took part of the swag there, as well as the young gentleman. With such a hue-and-cry as there was over the robbery, it would not be very safe for them to try to sell it.'

'What do you mean by the swag?' asked Ronald.

'Why, the silver, to be sure, young sir, and the other things that they took. Experienced men like them always know that it is safer to let the noise die down before they try to sell the swag, even if it is melted silver in a lump. Now, I shouldn't be at all astonished if there were some very pretty nuggets of metal hidden about that old dame's house. What might tell tales in Paris or London may be quite safe in the heart of Brittany, you know.'

'I'll tell you where it is,' cried Vivian, starting up suddenly. 'It is hidden in the little outhouse where Nanette stays.'

He looked so flushed and excited that Mr Maxwell glanced hastily at Dr Armitage, thinking that all the events of the day had brought on a return of the fever.

'No, it is all right; he knows what he is saying,' said the doctor, laying a restraining hand on Vivian's shoulder.—'Lie down again, my boy, and tell us quietly what makes you think that the silver is there.'

'Because one day, just when I first began to get about, I was in Nanette's stall, and I thought I heard a rat. You know how I hate rats,' and he shivered at the remembrance. 'Well, I was poking about in the thatch with a stick to see if I could see its hole, when Madame Genviève came in, and, oh, she was so angry! She looked frightened too, and she shook me until I was so giddy I could hardly see, and she said that if ever she found me poking there again she would beat me with her little stick.'

'Ah, she did, did she?' said the little rosy-faced man grimly, while Mrs Armitage took

Vivian's thin white hand in hers and held it fast. 'Well, we shall see what we shall see. I fancy Madame Genviève will need to put up with a variety of people who want to poke about in her thatched roof.—But by your leave, Monsieur the Vicomte, I shall say adieu, or rather *au revoir*. The train for Paris leaves Dinard at six o'clock sharp, and I think I hear the man bringing round the motor.' And with a cheery nod and smile the little man departed, eager to be on the track of the men for whom he and his colleagues had searched so diligently for the last six months.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A FRESH BEGINNING.

AFTER this Vivian made rapid progress. Happiness is a great restorer, and the little boy was very happy in those days.

Dr Armitage had soon to go back to his work; but Vivian's mother stayed with him for a whole month, until he was almost quite well and able to run about the beautiful grounds of the château, and even to go to Dinard; and when at last she had to go home, and would have taken her boys with her, the hospitable Vicomte, who was really rather a lonely man, begged so earnestly that they might both be allowed to remain a little longer that their father and she agreed to his request, all the more readily perhaps as the detective's words had proved true; and the newspapers in England were full of the romantic story of Vivian's reappearance, the capture of the gang of burglars in Paris, and the recovery of most of the silver which had been stolen from Mr Osbourne's house in January.

The thieves had not taken the precaution to melt it down, thinking, no doubt, that it was safe enough for the present in the thatch of Madame Genviève's cowhouse, so Aunt Dora had got most of her forks and spoons back again without their being any the worse, and Claude, to his great joy, had his christening-mug to drink out of once more.

Needless to say, every one who read the newspapers, and especially those who knew the principal actors in the story, were deeply interested in every detail of it; and, although Dr and Mrs Armitage would have liked their two boys at home with them once more, they felt that it was much better that Vivian should remain quietly where he was not known until the excitement had passed over.

So all through the long summer days he and Ronald remained at the Château de Choisigny, learning to speak fluent French with the Vicomte, and boating on the river with Mr Maxwell, who proved himself to be the most delightful companion, entering into all their plans and interests as if he had been a boy himself.

At school and college he had been a clever sketcher, and in this time of enforced idleness

he took up the pastime again, and gave lessons to the boys, Ronald proving an apt pupil; while Vivian could, as he said, 'at least draw things well enough to let the people at home know what they were meant for.'

Under his guidance, too, they began a collection of butterflies and one of wild-flowers, and altogether the time passed so happily that it was almost with regret that they saw the end of August approaching.

Mr Maxwell was going to take up his work in his new parish in the beginning of September, and the happy party must then be broken up.

'Another month, and you will be quite settled down in Cornwall, *mon ami*,' said the Vicomte one evening, as they were idly drifting down the Rance in a little white rowing-boat, 'and I will be preparing to set out to visit you and to rub up my English a little.'

'And we will be home again,' said Ronald in such a melancholy voice that every one laughed. 'Of course,' he went on apologetically, 'I shall be very glad to be back with father and mother and little Dorothy, especially now that Vivi will be there too; but it has been so jolly here, and after the holidays it may be rather dull at

home, for the Strangeways are going to school, and we will need to do our lessons alone.'

'I thought you never much liked the Strangeways, and didn't mind their going away,' said Vivian.

'No; I didn't much care for them as long as I had you; but they were better than nobody,' said Ronald candidly. 'We will be the only boys in the neighbourhood now, and I don't think we will go to school till next year at least. But, anyhow, they will not be gone for a week or two after we go back, so it won't be so very quiet just at first, and we will get used to it after a bit.'

Vivian said nothing, but his face flushed. No one knew how he was dreading the return home and the shower of questions which he knew would be poured upon him by Fergus, and Vere, and Charlie. He would have done anything in the world to have avoided the meeting; but he knew it was unavoidable, so he was trying to accept it as part of his punishment, and to face it as bravely as he could.

Perhaps Mr Maxwell read his thoughts, for he laid his hand kindly on his shoulder.

'I wonder how you two boys would like to

come straight down to Cornwall with me?' he said, smiling. 'I have been thinking lately that I shall be very lonely after all the companionship which I have had here.—What say you, Ronald; do you think that we could do Latin and Greek together, and you could go on with your sketches?'

'It would be jolly, sir,' said Ronald; 'but I am afraid we must go home now. The holidays are nearly past, and we can't go everywhere.'

But Vivian saw what Mr Maxwell meant more clearly.

'I believe you are in earnest, sir, and that you have asked father and mother to let us go and do lessons with you,' he cried, clasping his friend's hand in his excitement. 'Oh, I hope they will let us go; you don't know how I dread going home.'

'Gently, gently, old fellow,' said Mr Maxwell, as he noted Vivian's quivering lips. Any sudden excitement was apt to bring on severe attacks of headache, which still caused anxiety to the little boy's friends, for they showed that the bad effects of the long period of strain which he had passed through were not completely gone. 'The fact is, I have arranged matters with

your father and mother, and you are both going to keep me company for the next year or so, and do lessons with me. And, unless you very much want to go home first, we think it better that you should go straight to Cornwall with me next week. Do you like the plan, eh?'

'I think it splendid, sir,' said Ronald, feeling all at once that he was raised to the status of a public school boy; for was not living and doing lessons with a private tutor quite as good as being at school? While Vivian only squeezed Mr Maxwell's hand very tightly, and whispered so softly that no one else could hear, 'It is the new beginning you told me about, isn't it, sir?' And although the words were vague, Mr Maxwell knew what he meant.

'But had we better not go home for a day or two?' asked Ronald after a pause. 'Will we not be rather in the way when you are settling your things in the Rectory? You told us that all your things were packed up, and that you would not have them sent down from London until you were there to see to them yourself.'

'Ha, you luxurious fellow!' laughed Mr Maxwell, 'so you are afraid that you will arrive

to find nothing but bare boards, and perhaps one plate and one cup amongst us. Well, for your comfort, I may tell you that the Rectory is furnished already, and I have only my books and pictures to arrange, and I shall expect you to help me with those.'

'Oh, I didn't mean that,' said Ronald; 'for even if the house hadn't been furnished, Vivi and I could have roughed it; but I thought perhaps we might be in the way just at first. You will have such a lot to see to when there is no lady'—— And here he stopped and grew red, feeling that it was not very polite to allude to Mr Maxwell's bachelor ways.

But the clergyman only laughed.

'So you think that I would need a wife to arrange my belongings, or a sister, eh, Ronald? Well, I am sorry I have neither; but a very charming lady has promised to go down and get things ready for us—a lady and a dear little girl.'

Something in his voice made both boys look up.

'Do you mean mother and Dorothy?' they asked in one breath.

Mr Maxwell's eyes twinkled. 'Wild horses

will not drag any more particulars out of me,' he said; 'only I think that you will find when you get there that there will be at least sheets on the beds, and perhaps even a cup of tea waiting for you.' And with that the boys had to be content.

CHAPTER XXV.

WESTWARD HO!

IT is a far cry from Dinard to the west of Cornwall; and by the time they were nearing their destination on the second day of their journey both boys were feeling rather tired. But they brightened up when at last they left the train, and took their places in the coach which was to carry them over the twenty miles which lay between the last station to which the railway ran and the little fishing-village of Polwherne.

It was a lovely drive up and down steep country roads and over wide stretches of moorland, where the heather grew like a purple pall, and the wild moorfowl circled over their heads uttering shrill cries as they passed. All at once, just as the sun was setting, they seemed to come to the end of the land, for without any warning, at the top of a steep ascent, the moorland suddenly stopped, and they found

themselves looking down on a wide expanse of dark-blue sea, over which the last rays of the sun shone like burnished gold.

Down below them, to the right, the cliffs fell back a little, forming a tiny bay, and here, nestling to the sides of the rocks, lay a tiny, red-roofed village, which was reached by a steep, straggling road.

It was evidently a fishing-village, for the main street ran down to a miniature harbour, which was full of boats. Farther on, running along the foot of the cliffs, was a long stretch of yellow sand, which, however, showed signs of being covered by the sea at high-tide.

'So this is Polwherne, boys,' said Mr Maxwell, as the driver drew up his horses for a moment's breathing-space before they began the descent. 'I hope you will not find it too dull. There will be lots of boating to be had, and long tramps on the moors, and in winter we must keep ourselves busy with work and books.'

'Oh no, we sha'n't be dull; it looks a jolly place,' cried both the boys at once, for they were passionately fond of the sea, and were never at a loss to find occupation when they were within reach of it. 'Why, we will soon

learn to know all about a boat, and we can make a model of one in the winter. We tried to make one once at home, but we had nothing to copy from. But what a road for a carriage! Do you think the man will ever manage to get down with all those boxes?'

'He is accustomed to it, I expect,' said Mr Maxwell. 'See, he has long skids to put on the wheels to keep the coach back. He comes over here three days a week, so he knows the road well. Besides, the Rectory is not very far down; that is it, that big red house among the trees at the top of the main street. Well, I hope that the lady I spoke of has a good tea waiting for us.'

The driver had arranged his skids and climbed up to his seat once more; glancing over his shoulder with a cheery 'To the Rectory, sir?' he cracked his whip, and the coach began its lumbering descent. It needed skilful driving; but the man knew what he was about, and in less than five minutes he had turned his horses in at the low wooden gate which led to the Rectory grounds.

'Hallo! there are quite a lot of people at the door,' said Ronald in a bewildered voice,

and then he gave a shout of glad surprise. 'Look, Vivi, look!' he cried. 'There is father and mother, and Uncle Walter and Aunt Dora, and all the others. Even Isobel, not on a chair at all, but walking about like the rest.'

And there, indeed, they all were, crowding round the coach, with eager greetings helping the boys to jump down, and lifting out their numerous packages.

'Vivi has comed back to me, mine own Vivi!' cried little Dorothy, forsaking for once her elder brother in her joy at finding her younger one; while Isobel, taller and thinner than she had been at Christmas-time, and with closely cropped hair, linked her arm in Vivian's, whispering in delight, 'Isn't this jolly? And aren't you astonished to see us all here? We came to give you a surprise, and we are to stay a whole month. Uncle Jack only arrived this afternoon; but auntie and Dorothy came two days ago, and we came last night. We are living in that white house down there; you can see the chimneys just over the garden wall, and I have left my stupid old chair behind me. The doctor says I do not need it any more.'

Then they all went in to tea, in the low, old-

fashioned dining-room, with its mullioned windows which looked out over the sea.

And such a tea it was, to be sure! There was newly baked bread, and fresh boiled eggs, and a great dish of shrimps which the children had caught in the pools that morning; and delicious butter and honey, and a pile of hot girdle cakes, and a round orange-cake, Vivian's favourite, which Aunt Dora had brought all the way from London with her.

Mrs Armitage sat at the head of the table, and Mr Maxwell at the foot, and it seemed as if every one laughed and talked and ate as they had never laughed and talked and eaten in their lives before.

'I think I have never been at such a jolly tea-party,' said Ronald, when at last he had to own that he was satisfied, and could not tackle even a tiny piece more of Aunt Dora's orange-cake.

'Nor I!' 'Nor I!' 'Nor I!' echoed Isobel and Vivian and Claude.

'It reminds me of the tea-party we had the night you came to us at Christmas, Ronald,' said Ralph, 'before all the fuss began. We had orange-cake that night, and I don't believe I

have tasted it since. Do you remember, we had the silver cake-knife upstairs to cut the icing and to make the table look nice—mother's best silver cake-knife, which the thieves took, and which she has never got back?'

It was an unfortunate remark, for it brought back much that every one was trying to forget. Somehow, Ralph had a habit of making such remarks.

There was a moment's pause, and then all the elders began to talk at once, hoping that Vivian had not heard Ralph's words, for they had determined that no shadow of reproach should mar his home-coming.

But he had heard it, and his face turned crimson. 'I thought all the silver had been found, Aunt Dora,' he began timidly, looking across the table to where his aunt was seated.

'So it has, dearie,' she answered brightly, 'all but one or two things which are of no moment. The most important is a great silver epergne which my great-uncle Joseph gave me when I was married, and which I felt I must keep out on the sideboard, as he is always popping in to lunch in the most unexpected fashion, and his feelings would have been deeply

hurt if he had missed it. He thought it a most wonderful work of art, while I sometimes felt as if I would like to give it to a bazaar or something, just to get it out of the way. So now it is gone without hurting anyone's feelings, and I do not mourn it. Besides,' she went on, 'that party was not nearly as nice as this one—was it, Isobel? We had not Uncle Jack, nor Aunt Dora, nor little Dorothy; and we did not even know Mr Maxwell's name then.'

'Me don't know him now,' said little Dorothy, who always said straight out what she thought, and who had been studying the strange gentleman all tea-time, with great wondering eyes, from her place of honour at Vivian's right hand.

'Don't you, young lady,' said Mr Maxwell, pushing back his chair, among general laughter, and coming round to where she sat. 'Ah, then I cannot take you round the garden pickaback; I only do that to people whom I know.'

'Oh, but me will know you now,' cried Dorothy, who dearly loved this mode of travelling, stretching out her arms to the kind, worn face which always exercised a peculiar fascination over children; and, in the roars of laughter

which greeted this sudden change of opinion, the threatened cloud was forgotten, and Vivian's face grew bright once more.

So once again the old story proved true all through, and the little prodigal coming back to his own country found, instead of the stern welcome which he had expected, only laughing and feasting and rejoicing. And here, in his new home, we may say good-bye to him, for he has learned his bitter lesson, and learned it well. And no truer resolve was ever made, or more faithfully kept, than the one he made that night when he was alone with his mother in the little bedroom which opened out of Ronald's, and which was to belong to him, that from henceforth he would strive with all his might against his besetting sin, and that when he was overcome by it—as all of us are, many times, by our own special temptations—he would not try to hide it, but would own up at once fully and freely, and then begin again with fresh energy to fight his battle with all his might.

THE END.

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